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A Jungle of Anxious Desires: Representing New Orleans, 1880 – 2005

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A Jungle of Anxious Desires:

Representing New Orleans, 1880 - 2005

by

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A Jungle of Anxious Desires:
Representing New Orleans, 1880 – 2005

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New Orleans has been the subject of a narrative of exoticization throughout much of its history as an American space. The dominant trend in representation casts this city as a lush site of strangeness, intercultural confusion, enchantment, and, occasionally, an alternatively transformative or annihilative freedom. My project travels across genres and critical frameworks to explore the history and development of the narrative of New Orleans' exoticism in literary and public discourse. The narrative's evocative rhetoric, including the frequent appearance of the term "jungle," and its emphasis on both charm and degeneracy encode larger doubts over the ability of the city to fit national ideals. These codes draw on a negative racial imaginary and manifest as sentiments of anxiety and desire over the crossing of nationally normative racial and sexual boundaries. Although the generative position of the narrative has gone largely unrecognized, it surfaces in multiple contexts and in concert with larger discursive trends, such as 19th century interests in racially exclusive American nationalism and 20th century fears of a racialized, sexualized other. This project pays particular attention to the articulations of the narrative in George Washington Cable's novel *The Grandissimes* and in the New Orleans-based works of Tennessee Williams. It also explores challenges to the narrative offered by contemporary poets Brenda Marie Osbey and Joy Harjo. Additionally, it investigates the recycling of the narrative in contemporary political discourse.

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Introduction: New Orleans as a Jungle of Anxious Desires

The city of New Orleans is the subject of a peculiar and persistent history of representation. It often appears as a character in its own right, more foreground than background, more active than passive. As setting, it provides a good deal of mileage as a suitable location for the unfolding of strange and unsettling events. The 2008 big-budget film *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, starring Brad Pitt, is a key example. In a review tellingly titled "New Orleans, Brad Pitt Shine in Benjamin Button," movie critic Mike Scott attributes the lead role of the film less to the actor than to the city, which has become, he writes, "a meaningful character in this version of Fitzgerald's story," and one that "is sensitively and tenderly portrayed." Indeed, Scott's review makes much of the fact that New Orleans figures prominently in the film, which is based on an F. Scott Fitzgerald story originally set in Baltimore. Filmmakers, however, re-set the story to take place in New Orleans, even threading the story line with scenes set in the hours approaching the landfall of Hurricane Katrina, an event that Scott also credits as playing "a poignant role" in the film.

Scott's assessment of the city as character points to the curious case of New Orleans, just as the filmmakers' choice to relocate the film in this city speaks to the evocative power of the place. Both Scott and the filmmakers understand New Orleans as adding a deep richness to the narrative, bringing its own mythos to bear on the telling of the story, and adding shape to the direction of the narrative by providing an intense, inherent representational force. But for Scott, the idea of New Orleans provides so much

texture in the narrative that it transcends mere setting. Scott does not measure the accuracy or fairness of the film's construction of New Orleans, nor does he look to other representational hallmarks for his evaluation, but he instead reviews New Orleans' role in the film by mythologizing the city, attributing to it a far greater representational power than it actually assumes in the film. Whereas the filmmakers recognize the unique aura of New Orleans in re-setting the film there, Scott exaggerates this quality with his assessment of the place as character.

The case of New Orleans in *Benjamin Button* reveals the imaginative potential that the city holds for writers and reviewers who rely on and magnify its representational power, and their fascination with the place is only a recent example of a long-standing habit of American imagination. The idea of New Orleans as an alluring and exotic place has long held a tight grip on the American consciousness, and this idea finds regular articulation in literature, political rhetoric, and everyday life. In literature, it manifests in constructions of New Orleans as highly unusual, often a space for depraved or hedonistic behavior, or even as an un-American site. Such references are abundant, generated by writers with varying levels of national influence over a long span of years. By 1848, for example, New Orleans' reputation was established firmly enough that Walt Whitman could refer to it as the "wickedest city in Christendom," and twentieth century descriptions have not travelled far from his assessment (qtd. in J. Kaplan 139). William Faulkner describes New Orleans in *Absalom, Absalom!* as "that city foreign and paradoxical, with its atmosphere at once fatal and languorous, at once feminine and steel-hard" (86). A few decades later, Bob Dylan writes in *Chronicles I* of New Orleans, "The

past doesn't pass away so quickly here. [...] The ghosts race towards the light, you can almost hear the heavy breathing spirits, all determined to get somewhere. New Orleans, unlike a lot of those places you go back to and that don't have the magic anymore, still has got it" (180). In the 1980 novel *A Confederacy of Dunces*, John Kennedy Toole writes, "This city is famous for its gamblers, prostitutes, exhibitionists, anti-Christs, alcoholics, sodomites, drug addicts, fetishists, onanists, pornographers, frauds, jades, litterbugs, and lesbians, all of whom are only too well protected by graft" (5). That book itself also opens with a quote from A.J. Liebling: "New Orleans resembles Genoa or Marseilles, or Beirut, or the Egyptian Alexandria more than they can resemble any place in the interior. Like Havana and Port-au-Prince, New Orleans is within the orbit of a Hellenistic world that never touched the North Atlantic" (qtd. in Toole xxi). If these references to the city's depravity, sensuality, romantic ghostliness, sin and un-Americanness represent the normative view of New Orleans, the consensus is well-heard and echoed in critical sources. In *The Companion to Southern Literature*, the entry for "New Orleans" reads: "Even today, when attitudes toward morals are more permissive nationwide, the reputation of New Orleans as 'Sin City' persists. It remains the place in which some residents of other parts of the country believe that they can forget briefly their moral compunctions and indulge whatever desires they may have" (543).

If the exotic city's allure is fittingly compelling for writers, it is perhaps more puzzling to note that critical sources, such as *The Companion to Southern Literature*, have also regularly replayed narratives of exotic New Orleans. Similar to Scott, these critics ignore the fact that the exotic city is the product of a particular process of

construction. In doing so, they reinscribe a habit of exoticizing the city rather than looking for the genesis of the representation. In a 1993 essay on *A Streetcar Named Desire*, for example, W. Kenneth Holditch points to works by Tennessee Williams, William Faulkner and Kate Chopin in his observation that New Orleans "functions as a catalyst effecting radical changes in characters' lives" (148). Holditch realizes that the "equation of the city with both romance and decadence is a product of the fiction writers who have for two centuries spun a web of the imagination around it" (149). But if Holditch recognizes the traction New Orleans generates on the American imagination at large, he is prone less to analyze than to describe and thus re-assert the exotic features of the imagined city. After describing "the fascination the city exerted" on twentieth century writers, he writes that the representation of exotic New Orleans "is rooted in substantial fact, for in truth, the place is more romantic than perhaps any other American city due to several factors: the aura of history […]; its Old World charm […]; a way of life that is much more Latin than American, Mediterranean than southern, Catholic permissive than Calvinist prohibitive" (149). If this explanation of the "factual" basis for the representation does begin to look toward roots like colonial history, it also accepts the city's romance and "charm" as generative facts that compel further representations, rather than reading them as historical constructs themselves with their own set of deep and often troublesome roots. The problem with an approach like Holditch's is far more than a problem of missed opportunity for scholarship. It is a problem of ignoring the basic fact of representation and of failing to recognize what is essentially a discourse that has

stressed New Orleans' strangeness since at least the 19th century. Yet somehow this misreading of the city persists.

The absence of investigation into the history of the representation of New Orleans prompts this project, which proposes that allusions to the city's exoticism, at their base level, are grounded in a representational history that seeks at times to make sense of, and at times to mystify, the breaking of boundaries that delineate nationally normative racial and sexual intimacies. Responses to these boundary crossings are often emotionally charged but are not always articulated directly; instead, they are represented more frequently through narrative codes and evasions, much in keeping with Toni Morrison's assessment in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* that "in matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse" (9). In the case of New Orleans' representational history, these evasions manifest as the aura of an exotic city, the result of a sort of shadow play of language capable of only indirectly registering intense emotional landscapes. The result is the opening of a rhetorical space in which anxieties and desires are narrated in a context rich with fantasy and contradiction.

The representation has much in common with what Toni Morrison identifies as an "Africanist personae" in American literature, a "reflexive" and "extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious" (17). Morrison argues that this personae is the product of white American writers who, in the process of creating a national literature, have relied upon the rhetorical possibilities of an imagined, racialized blackness in order to articulate the

anxieties and longings central to identity construction. From our nation's earliest literary works onward, Morrison argues, African Americans have offered white writers "a resident population... upon which the imagination could play; through which historical, moral, metaphysical, and social fears, problems, and dichotomies could be articulated" (37). The result is the construction of an American identity through opposition to an imagined racial other that is often constructed indirectly. The "rawness and savagery" that some writers associate with Africanism, for example, allows for the articulation of a sense of national "autonomy, authority... and absolute power," just as the idea of slavery highlights the value of freedom (44). Morrison explains, "Even, and especially, when American texts are not 'about' Africanist presences or characters or narrative or idiom, the shadow hovers in implication, in sign, in line of demarcation" (46-47). In short, the Africanist presence functions as the sometimes visible, but also often invisible other, the shadow self allowing white American literary identity to emerge through stark contrast.

Morrison's theory can be expanded to illustrate the process through which New Orleans' sense of place is established. Like Morrison's Africanist personae, the exotic city becomes a rhetorical space marked notably by the difference attributed to it from national norms. It becomes "a playground for the imagination" (38), infused with romance and strangeness, yet its difference is fundamentally tied to its authors notions about racial and sexual boundaries. Just as the Africanist personae allows writers to meditate on the meanings and boundaries of race and to weigh their own place in the nation, so do the writers writing New Orleans craft the city's aura of exoticism in attempting to narrate the deviations from sexual and racial norms that they locate there.

In doing so, these writers tend to remove New Orleans from participation in the national fabric; in their representations, New Orleans becomes a distinctly othered space which permits the crossing of racial and sexual boundaries that the rest of the nation ostensibly upholds as discrete. Their constructions of exotic New Orleans manifest both directly and indirectly. In its more direct expressions, the idea of exotic New Orleans employs outwardly racialized discourses that replay racial stereotypes in their construction of language and characters. More insidiously, however, excess emotional materials like anxiety and desire, which do not find expression directly, are registered in the continued assessments, often generated with intense rhetorical impact, of New Orleans as uniquely bizarre.

Representations of exotic New Orleans tend to maintain a remarkable level of continuity over time. Two particular representations generated over a century and a half apart can illustrate the persistence of key representational habits, articulated both directly and indirectly, that distance New Orleans from national norms. In a collection of records titled *Daily Life in Louisiana, 1815-1830*, Liliane Crété assumes an onlooker's perspective in describing a scene at New Orleans' Congo Square, a public place where slaves were allowed to gather socially on Sundays:

> "There were sensual, even blatantly erotic dances, in which the dancers mimicked the motions of lovemaking…. A horde of white spectators pressed round the gates of the square, their faces registering a mixture of amusement, astonishment, shock, scorn, and indulgence. The African rhythms and dances were obviously not to everyone's taste, and some of

> the Americans in the crowd must have looked on the scene as a display of savagery that no one but a black or Creole could savor or condone." (qtd. in Roach 64)

In her observation, Crété explicitly constructs a system of racial hierarchy, in which white spectators become the guardians of civility and moral superiority, while the black and mixed race performers are relegated to a distinctly separate, lower social sphere of savagery and lewdness. However, Crété's rhetoric simultaneously insists on a sizable crowd ("horde") whose interest is not merely dismissive or passive, but is actively engaged as they "press" around the gates to view the dances. Although Crété's response is directly designed to create exclusionary racial categories, her own rhetoric also undermines her own suggestion that white is right and black is base. The eroticism that she attributes to the slave dancers is not entirely unfavorable for her, despite her outward expressions of distaste, but seems instead to have an attractive quality for her and the interested "horde… pressed round the gates," all of whom seem to indulge their voyeurism at length. Even Crété seems to watch more than one dance here, as indicated by her use of plural nouns. In this passage, what Crété constructs as the blackness of the dancers is directly contained for her both by a physical gate and by rhetorical derision, but it is also indirectly invested with an eros and a strangeness that remain intensely compelling. She and the other white onlookers cannot help but to stop and stare.

Crété's passage offers not only a lens for looking at the processes through which racial categories are made in New Orleans; it also suggests that exotic New Orleans has essentially been imagined as a oppositional space that threatens national identity because

it threatens whiteness. In her description, Crété insists on the irreducible difference of black and Creole New Orleanians, who have practices and tastes that are decidedly, according to Crété, both non-white and non-national. These preferences are depicted as excessively sexual, overtly expressive, and depraved. Crété is careful to assert the difference of black and Creole New Orleanians from the onlooking "Americans," despite the fact that New Orleans has already passed to American control by the time of her writing. Ultimately, her remark critiques Congo Square as a foreign space, which she defines as a separate and primitive landscape associated with a sense of sexuality and depravity that is central to her construction of blackness. Considering Crété's construction of an opposition between the morally offended "American" spectators and the tolerant (and racialized) New Orleanians, it would be an easy imaginative stretch for Crété's readers to associate this brand of exoticism not only with Congo Square, but with the idea of New Orleans as a whole. While Crété critiques the exoticism of the city as too sexual, too expressive and too black, she also clearly constructs it as compelling. Despite its obscene character, or perhaps because of it, Crété suggests, New Orleans is a magnetic location, enticing even its staunchest critics to keep on looking.

Crété's racialized critique, which manifests as both overt disdain and a more mystified sense of compelling exoticism, is often replayed in representations of New Orleans. In fact, we can fast forward to 1987 to see a clear echo of Crété's perspective in the film *Angel Heart*. In one scene in the film, white detective Harry Angel (Mickey Rourke) travels undercover just beyond the boundaries of New Orleans to witness a voodoo ceremony held by a group of African American dancers and drummers. A key

highlight of the scene is shown from Angel's perspective as he hides undetected at the periphery of the gathering, watching the overtly eroticized dance of the character Epiphany (Lisa Bonet), whose sexualized, ecstatic movements are responses to spirit possession and her sacrifice of a chicken. If the scene relies directly on stereotypical representations of voodoo, it also is not far removed from Crété's early 19th century depiction of the dances of black New Orleanians. Both representations fixate on a spectacle made of black bodies dancing. The activity is portrayed as excessive, yet it must be watched, and both Crété and *Angel Heart* present this spectacle with a mixture of condemnation and fascination, asserting its strangeness, its sensuality and its wickedness. Just as Crété mediates the dance for her audience through a moralistic lens, so does *Angel Heart* mediate Epiphany's dance through the sensationalizing gaze of Harry Angel, whose reactions of attraction, fear, sexual interest and repulsion define the lens through which the dance is viewed.

The comparison between Crété and *Angel Heart* is not meant to elide the historical nuances that distinguish these representations, but rather to show that a continuum of representation persists in the construction of New Orleans. In both instances, the city becomes a setting for the narration of events that assume a strong exotic aura, a sense that one cannot help one's compulsion to watch the strange spectacle taking place there. Yet under scrutiny, this aura is revealed to be closely connected to a racialized discourse that constructs blackness as overtly sexual, primitive and depraved. In both representations, this discourse functions alongside assessments of New Orleans as foreign, or at least divorced from national norms. Crété asserts New Orleans' difference

in distinguishing between New Orleanians and Americans, while *Angel Heart* represents members of Epiphany's community as conspicuously French-speaking and thus not quite assimilated into the national fabric, even by the twentieth century. In both representations, the construction of New Orleans' exoticism becomes problematic not only because it relies on damaging notions of blackness, but also because it suggests that blackness cannot be reconciled with American identity. Instead, writers like Crété and the makers of *Angel Heart* reckon with the myth of blackness by relegating it to a separate space, exotic New Orleans. The city's placement on the periphery of the nation allows these writers a space to explore their myths, fears and fantasies without upsetting the racial and sexual boundaries imposed by national norms. In many instances, the result is a damaging construction of exoticism that registers the writers' fears and longings over crossing those boundaries.

In charting the history of New Orleans' representation as an exotic space, I locate the first chapter of this dissertation in a study of George Washington Cable's 1880 novel *The Grandissimes*. His novel allows me to begin to answer the question, "Why New Orleans?" in figuring out how that city, or why that particular city and not another, entered into a history of representation that has marked it as America's arguably most exotic urban landscape. The answer seems tethered to the city's history of racial politics. In focusing much of its dramatic tension around the racially mixed Creoles of color, an active, cohesive community of New Orleanians who were gradually marginalized over the course of the 19th century, *The Grandissimes* reveals a strong link between the representation of this group and the city's reputation as an exotic site. Cable represents

the Creoles of color via two competing urges. He demonstrates a sincere interest in the politics of race-making by defending the civil liberties of Creoles of color, but he also undermines his more progressive goals in several moves that demonstrate the workings of a narrative of exoticism. First, the novel mystifies its characters and New Orleans' sense of place by drawing upon racialized discourse, and it also prepares grand, traumatic exits for the Creole of color characters, despite the novel's otherwise happy ending. The removal of these characters at the novel's end also coincides with Cable's suggestion that New Orleans has assimilated into the nation, thus indicating that a collapse of the city's complex racial frameworks is crucial to his vision of American identity. In total, these moves indicate Cable's anxiety toward his Creole of color characters, though he ostensibly argues in their defense. Ultimately, these more coded, anxious gestures, which counter Cable's outward claims, become the basis for the representation of an exotic city whose American identity depends upon its ability to rid itself of its racially mixed communities, which threaten normative American racial definitions.

If Cable's work reveals the construction of New Orleans' exoticism as an expression of racial anxiety, Tennessee Williams' work registers similar emotions but also conveys anxiety over the crossing of sexual boundaries. Chapter two investigates Williams' contribution to the representation of exotic New Orleans in *A Streetcar Named Desire, Suddenly Last Summer*, and "Desire and the Black Masseur." In these works, Williams not only inherits Cable's tendencies, but he also opens a new field of representation by deploying the word "jungle" to describe both New Orleans and the taboo nature of interracial, homosexual intimacies. The term allows Williams access to a

discourse that plays with the imaginative possibilities of a mythologized blackness, through which Williams registers fears and longings over intimacies that were not permitted direct expression in his time. In using the word "jungle" to narrate both the experience of boundary-crossing and the site of these transgressions, Williams creates an association between place and activity. New Orleans-as-jungle becomes a site for Williams' meditation on these transgressions. He reveals them, contemplates them and ultimately writes fulfillment of them as annihilative, ending with severe psychic and physical disruption or destruction. The result is the construction of an idea of New Orleans that lies on the periphery of national normativity because it is permissive yet deeply destructive.

While a history of the development of the idea of exotic New Orleans in literature could certainly be traced, comprising more authors or events than I focus on here, I have decided in my initial chapters to pause at the works of Cable and Williams. I have focused my study around these authors in part because they would be seminal figures if one were to define a canon of New Orleans authors. Both have offered well-circulated texts and are arguably influential in terms of laying out blueprints for the process of imagining New Orleans. But Cable's and Williams' works are also important in that their constructions of exotic New Orleans emerge through similarly coded language to narrate racial and sexual intimacies that were considered transgressive. Part of the work of this project involves revealing the codes used by Cable and Williams, in order to show what is at stake in the representation of exotic New Orleans – namely, the reinscription of a damaging racialized discourse that is rarely far from the surface of many

representations. My project is to slow down the heady notions of New Orleans that have fascinated writers and critics who recycle the representation without investigating its roots. In pausing the narratives of Williams and Cable, my hope is to look more closely at the scaffolding that undergirds these narratives and thus bring into light the processes of construction beneath the idea of the exotic city. My hope is that by reading their works closely, I will suggest a model through which additional representations of exotic New Orleans can be explored.

Whereas the first two chapters reveal the key processes at work behind the literary construction of exotic New Orleans, the final chapter examines contemporary representations that demonstrate the sticking power of the idea of exotic New Orleans as well as the difficulty of stepping beyond this narrative in representing the city. In the final chapter, I shift my attention to contemporary poems by Brenda Marie Osbey and Joy Harjo, who work to some degree within the parameters of the discourse of exotic New Orleans by calling forth ghosts from the city's colonial past. However, the ghostly figures in their poems do more to challenge, rather than reinscribe, the narrative of exotic New Orleans. Instead of constructing New Orleans through a discourse that relies on the imaginative potential of a mythologized blackness, both Osbey and Harjo use ghostly figures to link the past to the present and to respond to the legacy of Cable's novel and subsequent representations of exotic New Orleans. Gesturing toward earlier points of origin of the idea of exotic New Orleans – points at which racial others were excised from the historical record or otherwise engaged into a history of misrepresentation – Osbey's and Harjo's ghosts, which include local folk heroes as well as colonial explorers,

confront this history of representation, their broken bodies pointing to a need to recover lost narratives.

In total, the narratives that stress New Orleans' exoticism tend to pose some doubt as to the city's place in the national fabric. In some narratives, this doubt is cause for anxiety, as in Cable's *The Grandissimes,* which seeks to reconcile New Orleans as an American space, but does so by eliminating its mixed race characters. Additional representations, such as *Angel Heart* and the statements from Liliane Crété, also highlight New Orleans' exoticism while simultaneously expressing doubt about the city's Americanness. These representations seem to share a question over whether the city can be reconciled as a wholly national space, yet that question is at heart an encoding of anxieties over intimacies with racialized others.

The long-standing question into New Orleans' Americanness, often a fundamental part of narratives of exotic New Orleans and essentially an expression of racial anxiety, is obviously not articulated without consequences. Although the connection between New Orleans' attractive exoticism and the more troubling undercurrents of that narrative are often unrecognized, Virginia Dominguez, author of *White by Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana*, suggests that the narrative may have been in part responsible for mass media references that disparaged New Orleans as "Third World" in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Dominguez writes, "Exceptionalizing New Orleans, that is, deciding that this is yet another peculiarity of a city many Americans have long treated as unique and different from the rest of the country, is one big mistake I hope the American public will not allow itself to make" ("Seeing" par. 26). Specifically,

Dominguez argues that the tendency to dismiss New Orleans as strange leads to a failure to recognize that New Orleans shares larger American problems of social inequalities. Identifying New Orleans as exceptional, as somehow beyond normative national relations, is a way of cordoning off that which Americans don't want to recognize as part of the national fabric. If New Orleans is defined as other, then the larger issues that it shares with the rest of the nation are dismissed as anomalies. This response has obvious ill consequences on both national and local levels. Not only does this terminology leave real social inequalities unaddressed in New Orleans and the rest of the nation, but the "Third World" reference also continues to isolate New Orleanians under the terms of a racialized discourse that allows people, as Dominguez points out, "to think that poverty and non-whiteness are non-American things" ("Seeing" par. 13). This discourse, which relies on constructions of racial hierarchies and notions of national inclusion and exclusion, is essential to understanding how New Orleans has been imagined.

Ultimately, the intention of this project is to uncover the history and reveal the damaging effects of the representation of exotic New Orleans. While the problems associated with this representation are detectable in the examples covered by this project, we are also left to reckon with the fact of less troublesome-seeming, more romantic or devotional fixations with the city's charm, as seen in Bob Dylan's nostalgic references to the city, as well as in Mike Scott's affectionate reading of New Orleans' appearance in *Benjamin Button*. In these representations, the structuring racialized discourse is flattened out, so that a surface-level gesture toward New Orleans' exoticism persists, but without a racialized referent. Bob Dylan's ghosts, for example, suggest the resonances of

a submerged discourse, a by-product of the fact that any rhetorical space created by evasions and indirect language is rich with imaginative possibilities. His reference to New Orleans, like Mike Scott's, suggests that the anxieties and desires that have structured so many representations of New Orleans, especially those articulated indirectly, have been recycled into new narratives. This recycling process is relatively common, and it is arguably the basis of many comments and narratives that lovingly refer to the city's strangeness as a marker of treasured uniqueness. But unfortunately, the root discourse of this narrative, which relies on mythologies of blackness, also persists and maintains a worrisome currency, indicating trouble for both New Orleanians and Americans at large.

Chapter One:

George Washington Cable's *The Grandissimes* and the Makings of Exotic New Orleans

George Washington Cable's *The Grandissimes* lays the fundamental groundwork for narratives that stress New Orleans' exoticism. By page nine of Cable's novel, protagonist Joseph Frowenfeld is en route to New Orleans, boating through "a land hung in mourning, darkened by gigantic cypresses, submerged; a land of reptiles, silence, shadow, decay" (9). These "funereal swamps" evoke a near-mystical atmosphere in the landscape that takes us into the city. Interspersed among these descriptions of threat are also exclamations of the idyllic qualities of the landscape: "How sweet the soft breezes off the moist prairies! How weird, how very near, the crimson and green and black and yellow sunsets! How dream-like the land and the great, whispering river!" Cable's description of the landscape as both threatening and compelling, as well as explicitly strange, tends to remove the city to a land of dreams and pre-human history, suggesting that New Orleans somehow exists beyond the boundaries of contemporary national norms. By page ten, a key word appears: Frowenfeld has passed through "the deep shade of mighty willow-jungles." The term "jungle" signifies Cable's distancing of New Orleans from contemporary time and civilized space, and Cable intensifies its suggestive use by bringing forth the innate violence of the landscape that the term implies. Within the space of another page, Frowenfeld's entire family has arrived in New Orleans and

immediately succumbed to yellow fever; he is the sole survivor, poised to begin his journey in an unnavigable, unfamiliar environment whose beauty is sweeping but deadly.

The Grandissimes may feel familiar to contemporary readers because Cable romances New Orleans in a manner that has been inherited by literary successors such as Tennessee Williams. In fact, *The Grandissimes* is key for the study of later representations of exotic New Orleans in two major ways. First, Cable solidifies in the novel a series of codes for writing the idea of exotic New Orleans into a standard narrative form. In this narrative, a white stranger enters New Orleans alone and finds him or herself disoriented by the strangeness of the new environs. The stranger is both seduced and threatened by this strangeness, which the narrative accentuates, thus setting up New Orleans as a somehow distant, perhaps not quite American, landscape. An emphasis on lush landscape surfaces as well, often characterized as both charming and degenerate. But Cable's legacy isn't only to submit these codes to the literary tradition of representing New Orleans. *The Grandissimes* also offers us an opportunity to understand one of the crucial underpinnings of the exotic narrative that is often concealed. The representation of New Orleans as an exotic space often encodes anxieties over the crossing of racial boundaries, and it historically derives from a perspective that privileges whiteness. The construction of exotic New Orleans may be best described as rooted in a history of nervous response to the legacies of a complex, flexible racial order in New Orleans that challenged firm notions of whiteness and blackness. By the time Cable's novel was published, the city's colonial racial framework had become increasingly Americanized, collapsed toward a stricter, more binary system. Some understanding of

this process of racial re-making, as well as the larger process of Americanization of which it is a part, is crucial to situating the work of Cable's *The Grandissimes.*

The hardening of New Orleans' racial order toward a binary framework was a key element of a larger process that Joseph Logsdon and Caryn Cossé Bell identify as the Americanization of New Orleans in their co-authored article in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization.* Literally, Americanization describes a linguistic and cultural shift that redefined the city's social landscape, beginning with the Americans' rise to power following the 1803 Louisiana Purchase. Played out in cultural, legal and literary fields, Americanization was a lengthy and dramatic project that occurred largely over the course of the 19th century.

The group who felt the shift toward Americanization perhaps most keenly was a group of free Francophone Creoles of African ancestry who have been alternately identified in scholarly literature as *gens de couleur libre* (a nineteenth century phrase), Creoles of color, black Creoles and Franco-Africans. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall has identified this group as comprising an Afro-Creole culture in New Orleans. The group emerged from New Orleans' colonial history under French and Spanish rule. According to Caryn Cossé Bell, the city's multi-tiered racial order was the result of "a frontier society characterized by a high degree of social and economic fluidity" (11). Men outnumbered women in the colony, and this disproportion, coupled with "a Latin European religious ethic" (11) resulted in the formation of intimate relationships between female slaves and the European male settlers who eventually freed these women, as well as the children of their unions (Thompson, "Passing" 6). Spanish colonial policies in

particular supported the formation of this group. These policies facilitated manumission and were strategically designed to create a middle caste that would suppress the power of French elites. The middle caste also, according to Barbara Ladd, "provided the home government (as well as white Creoles, i.e., white persons born in the colonies) with assistance in the acculturation of alienated populations (slaves and natives) in the colony, but which did not threaten the 'integrity' (the status quo) of the colonialist government" (23). As a result, the free black class gained some degree of social legitimacy under colonial rule.

Bolstered by the influx of Haitian refugees in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the Creoles of color emerged as of "one of the most assertive, prosperous, well-educated, and cohesive free black societies in nineteenth-century North America" (Bell 6). Members of the community were highly literate, politically active, and involved in business and the arts. They occupied various strata of wealth as business owners, real estate moguls and skilled tradesmen, and they conducted business fluidly with whites.[1] However, as Shirley Thompson points out, their relatively fluid social position did not extend to marital rights with whites; in fact, bans against mixed race marriages "formed the basis for many of the restrictive laws" of the early 19th century ("Passing" 12). If Creoles of color maintained a somewhat mobile social position, however, their liminality was gradually eroded under American rule during the 19th century. In fact, we might identify the eventual de-legitimization of this group as a key outcome of the project of Americanization. Unlike the European colonial governments, the Americans were

[1] See Logsdon, especially "The Americanization of Black New Orleans" in *Creole New Orleans.* See also Charles E. O'Neill's foreword in *Our People and Our History* and Thompson, "The Passing of a People."

seeking not simply to obtain a colony but to establish a national territory in Louisiana, and the city's middle caste did not fit with national interests. Once the U.S. gained control of Louisiana, the older "assimilationist and colonialist policy toward racial relationships" moved toward "a segregationist and nationalist policy" that equated proof of whiteness with national identity (Ladd 23). This shift left the city's Afro-Creole population in a tenuous position as new social hierarchies became dominant.

Various and increasing restrictions undermined the social position of Creoles of color over the course of the 19th century. One of Governor William C. C. Claiborne's first initiatives in the newly American city, for example, was the disbanding of the black militia, which had been "a major vehicle of free black advancement and an esteemed social institution within the new regime" (Bell 33). Although this particular slight against free blacks was somewhat amended in subsequent years with the reinstatement of the militia, additional laws limited their authority and mobility. A law passed in 1830, for example, mandated that free blacks arriving in Louisiana between 1825 and 1830 could only remain in the state once they secured a license. Re-entry was not allowed to those who left, whether they held a license or not (Bell 79). Despite these strictures, some districts of New Orleans were "notoriously lax" in terms of law enforcement, and Creoles of color enjoyed some immunity from restrictions on mobility (Logsdon 207). An 1852 act affected the group's freedom more immediately, however, as city leaders merged New Orleans' three municipal districts, including "the virtually autonomous" municipalities in which the Creoles of color had enjoyed relative freedom. The act

passed official authority to the state, and policy enforcements intensified, limiting the Creoles of color far more severely (Logsdon 208).

The new regulations increasingly whittled away at their freedoms as well as legitimacy, but the Creoles of color maintained an active, adaptive political voice. In the 1850s, a young leadership class emerged among the group, inspired by the dissolution of slavery in the French West Indies in 1848 and the "vanguard racial policies of the Second Republic in France" (Logsdon 209). These leaders established a newspaper called *L'Union* in 1862. Its first issue contained a statement from the editors, who encouraged readers "'who can lend intellectual or pecuniary support to the propagation of the cause of the rights of man and humanity to do so without delay'" (qtd. in Bell 2). The focus here on universal rights demonstrates that the editors of *L'Union* responded to increasing restrictions on the Creole of color community by lobbying beyond group interests for the larger cause of black civil rights. Like *L'Union,* the successive newspaper *La Tribune,* which largely inherited its predecessor's focus and founding staff, cultivated a strategic alliance with black political interests, demonstrating complex negotiations of racial identity on the editors' behalf as a means of finding liberation from increasingly restrictive measures that sought to expand white dominance.[2]

The final decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 seems a sort of bookend for the Americanization project in New Orleans, as it firmly legislated the progressively hardening color line. In the early 1890s, Creole of color leaders formed a group known as the *Comite des Citoyens* that staged resistant acts against increasingly restrictive Jim

[2] Shirley Thompson describes the work of the editors of *L'Union* and *La Tribune* at length in *Exiles at Home.*

Crow laws. Rodolphe Desdunes, a *Comite* member, describes the group's goal as a "mission to protest the adoption and enforcement of the statutes that established the unjust and humiliating discrimination against the black race in Louisiana" (143), a statement that reflects a strengthening identification of Creoles of color with black political interests. Particularly, Desdunes notes, the group sought to challenge Louisiana's Separate Car Act of 1890, which prohibited integrated accommodations on railcar trains. They enlisted a Creole of color activist named Homer Plessy, who could pass for white, to serve as a plant on an intrastate train bound for Covington, Louisiana. Plessy was to sit in a whites-only railcar and then announce his mixed race identity, at which point he would be arrested, opening an opportunity for the committee to contest the 1890 act at the court level. Plessy did get arrested as planned, and the case moved through a series of courts. While the *Comite's* legal case was taken up successfully at the state level by renowned activist and novelist Albion Tourgée, it failed before the Supreme Court.[3] Instead of opening greater social possibilities for black and mixed race Americans, the case reaffirmed the color line, solidified the racial binary, and wrote "separate but equal" as the law of the land.

Americanization is often understood as assimilation, a process that played out in New Orleans as a social restructuring that gradually weakened the rights of black Creoles, ultimately effected the eventual dissolution of the city's flexible racial order, and pushed a more binary racial framework into place. Specifically, Shirley Thompson clarifies, the American project entailed "the disappearance of particular cultural identities

[3] Thompson describes the tensions of the case in *Exiles at Home.*

into the comprehensive categories, black and white, and the enthronement of an Anglo-American identity as the desirable one" ("Passing" 13).[4] As the color line hardened in New Orleans, the widespread interest in guarding racial boundaries became more apparent. Anxiety over racial hybridity and the instability of racial categories manifested in another key expression of the Americanization project that resonates with Cable's work – the restructuring of the term "Creole" in 19th century New Orleans.

The term "Creole" did not originally signal a racial identity, but a place-based one. In his article "Creoles and Americans," historian Joseph G. Tregle, Jr. explains the changing meanings of the term, which in the early 19th century signaled nativity to the place without reference to race. Rather, it created a dividing line between Francophone New Orleanians and the newly arrived Americans they saw as antagonists. The term was used to claim power via birthright: "Origin in the soil became, therefore, the very essence of the concept *creole*, precisely because it gave the older residents the most profound warrant of the right not to be dispossessed in their own land" (138). It wasn't until after the Civil War that New Orleanians who identified as white began to emphasize their own blood purity as being explicitly signified in the term Creole. Prior to the war, argues Tregle, such distinctions were unnecessary because the social dominance of whiteness was accepted as given; sharing a "definitional partnership" did not threaten "the social status or prerogative of the dominant class" (139). An exception, however, could be

[4] Americanization also shifted New Orleans from a Francophone culture to an Anglophone one. Legislative acts like the one that merged city districts in 1862 also mandated that English be the standard language of instruction in schools, helping to distance Creoles of color from their Francophone roots (Logsdon 242). French language skills declined among the younger generations, so that French literature and history were no longer read. This policy worked in tandem with the collapse of the old racial order; both trends were assimilative, designed to bring New Orleans more in line with the goals of a government working to establish a racialized national territory.

found occasionally in travel literature that explicitly defined Creoles as white, likely because locals who identified as white were careful to "correct" visitors' association of the term with mixed-blood status (139-40).

After the Civil War, investment in white identity became increasingly pronounced among Francophone Creoles who identified as white. Facing economic and cultural diminishment as the American project grew dominant in New Orleans, they "excised questionable genealogies and created a narrative of the past that conformed to American conceptions of race" (Thompson, "Passing" 15). Their insistence on their whiteness responded to growing anti-black sentiments and racial fears among white Anglo-Americans, and they began to insist upon the white racial purity of the term "Creole," horrified that "they might be confused with blacks" (Tregle 175). Their explicit adaptation of the term "Creole" to signal a white racial identity reflects a strategic response to the demands of the Americanization process and a growing American interest in equating whiteness with national identity. Proving their whiteness became a key concern for white Creoles after the Civil War. According to Virginia Dominguez, "For white Creoles, insistence on the exclusively Caucasian composition of the category became a matter of legal survival as well as social tranquility" (*White* 146). Acutely sensitive about their racial identity, "white" Creoles became more adamant about the blood purity of their group, and their insistence on their whiteness was a strategy designed to maintain their power under American rule.

By 1885, Louisiana historian Charles Gayarre was giving nervous speeches to address the racial valences of the term. In a speech delivered at Tulane University,

Gayarre argued that a Creole was "of European extraction, whose origin was known and whose superior Caucasian blood was never to be assimilated to the baser liquid that ran in the veins of the Indian and the African native." He claimed that the confusion over the term's racial meaning resulted from the common usage of Creole as a modifier for local goods such as "Creole horses, creole cattle, creole eggs, creole corn, creole cottonade, and creole 'negroes'" (qtd. in Thompson, "Passing" 10). This speech itself was in part a response to George Washington Cable's unflattering treatment of the group in *The Grandissimes,* which highlighted their elitist attitudes, indolence, moral vacuity, and more threateningly, their mixed-blood status. Viewed in the context of Americanization, Gayarre's racist speech demonstrates an anxious response to the possibility of an even deeper dismissal of the Creoles' power as Cable, in arguing for the hypocrisy of their racial injustice, revealed a more likely scenario of their racial makeup before the nation.

As Gayarre's comment reveals, Cable's novel aggravated the tenuous position of the Creoles who argued for their own whiteness. His incorporation of a mixed-blood lineage into the Grandissime family undermines the struggle of white Creoles to claim whiteness in a charged, changing social atmosphere. Accordingly, his character constructions made him "'the most cordially hated little man in New Orleans'" (qtd. in Turner 119). Cable's character constructions, which I will describe more fully below, reveal his own alignment with the project of Americanization in New Orleans. Although the hardening color line spurred anxious white Creoles to assert their claims to whiteness, Cable misses the fact

that this larger, nationally driven push toward whiteness underwrote the Creoles' racism.[5] He thus misses an opportunity to offer a corrective to this push, which simultaneously undermined the social and political position of the Creoles of color. Cable likewise fails in *The Grandissimes* to characterize the Creoles of color as a viable culture, despite the rhetorical stance he assumes as he argues for their rights. Just as Americanization entailed the replacement of the city's relatively fluid, tripartite racial order with a more binaristic framework – a process enacted through the protracted de-legitimizing of the middle caste, the Creoles of color – so Cable's representation of black Creoles in *The Grandissimes* precludes them from occupying a meaningful space in the text. His challenge to the social legitimacy of both groups places him squarely within the designs of the project of Americanization.

If the push toward Americanization in New Orleans involved the delegitimation of hybrid racial categories, it was underwritten by an urge to harden and protect the boundaries of whiteness. Despite Cable's well-documented rhetorical strides in defense of the civil rights of Creoles of color,[6] *The Grandissimes* narrates into literary form the

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[5] See Barbara Ladd's *Nationalism and the Color Line in George W. Cable, Mark Twain, and William Faulkner* (1996). Ladd reads the 1880s debate over the limits of the term *creole* as evidence of an emerging inquiry into "who might be or become an American" and as driven largely by an implicitly racist nationalism seeking "that the color line be reaffirmed" (29).

[6] In his introduction to the Penguin edition of *The Grandissimes*, Michael Kreyling follows in the vein of Cable scholars such as Arlin Turner, Newton Arvin, Richard Chase and Louis Rubin when he applauds Cable as "the model of the novelist as protester" (xix). This assessment of Cable, as a progressive social critic whose vision was somewhat marred by capitulations of the racism of his time, as evident especially in his character constructions, has been the standard critical line throughout much of the mid to late twentieth century. More recent assessments, however, situate Cable in a context of post-Civil War writers interested in reconciling the South to a larger framework of national identity that privileges a status quo of white social dominance. Amy Kaplan's "Nation, Region, and Empire" (1991), for example, argues that Cable's novel "rejects the explicit statement of an old era that 'we the people' always means white, but makes that concept implicit in the new era" (244). Likewise, Ladd's *Nationalism and the Color Line* reads *The Grandissimes* as Cable's attempt to reconcile the South to a nation highly invested in racial exclusivity.

process of New Orleans' Americanization, with all of its attendant anxieties over racial mixing. A fear of the dissolution of white racial identity and white social and economic dominance is at the heart of Cable's novel, and his construction of exotic New Orleans is a meditation on the instability and meaning of racial categories. For Joseph Frowenfeld, and perhaps for Cable also, considering that Frowenfeld is the voice of Cable's most pointed social critiques, one of the most anxiety-inducing yet enchanting – or perhaps we should say, disorienting – elements of New Orleans is the social scene that involves characters along a spectrum of racial identifications. "Blood is a great thing here, in certain odd ways… very curious sometimes," explains doctor Charlie Keene to the newly arrived Frowenfeld early on in the novel. His remark is presumably also offered to Frowenfeld's correlates, the reading audience, whom Cable seems to suggest need reminding that race doesn't operate in New Orleans as in does in the larger nation (15). But Keene's remark doesn't preface a clarification of the city's history of race-making or racial practice; it is the opening line of a narrative that emphasizes indecipherability. Keene says to Frowenfeld:

> "At a grand mask ball about two months ago… the proudest old turkey in the theater was an old fellow whose Indian blood shows in his very behavior, and yet – ha, ha! I saw that same old man, at a quadroon ball a few years ago, walk up to the handsomest, best dressed man in the house,

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My project follows in the latter vein of study but focuses primarily on Cable's relationship to the project of Americanization specifically unfolding in New Orleans, which deviates from Southern spaces in its nuances of race-making and deserves further study in terms of its unique evolution as an imagined space.

a man with a skin whiter than his own, – a perfect gentleman as to looks and manners, – and without a word slap him in the face." (15)

When Frowenfeld expresses shock at Keene's ensuing laughter, Keene replies, "The fellow had no business there. Those balls are not given to quadroon *males,* my friend. He was lucky to get out alive, and that was about all he did" (15). When Frowenfeld's face continues to reflect his confusion, Keene persists in defending the rightness of the events that happened, insisting, "The people here have got to be particular" (15). Keene then interrupts himself and begins haltingly to defend the honor of the mixed-race women, the quadroons, whose paid concubinage white men historically solicited at the balls. But Keene's defense of the women gets choked. He stops at the phrase, "Those ladies—," tries unsuccessfully to light his cigar and then blurts out, "Singular people in this country," still unable to light his cigar.

On one level, Cable's aim in this scene is to suggest an initial criticism of the Creoles' hypocritical racist behavior. Here, Keene's story suggests that the attacking Creole man struck his opponent for crossing racial barriers – yet the "white" Creole man[7] himself was mixed-race. This critique is one that reappears throughout *The Grandissimes.* Cable is careful to construct the Creoles as a mixed-race group early in the novel; the strategy serves to point out what Cable considers their fatal flaw in holding fast to their racism against black and mixed-race (non-Native American) people: the Creoles themselves aren't "white" either. Cable's attack on the Creoles is also evident, if more subtly suggested, in Keene's strangulated attempt at defending the quadroon balls.

[7] Keene and other characters in his social group identity as white, sometimes vehemently, throughout the text, despite the presence of a Native American ancestor in their family tree.

Keene can't quite mount a legitimate description or defense of this practice, so the novel never quite explains what quadroon balls are, though it does suggest that they are unusual enough to prompt a sort of speechlessness. But for a savvy reader familiar with this practice (such as Cable's New Orleans audience), the impotence of Keene's defense, emphasized by his inability to light his cigar, could easily serve as critique. The Creoles, Cable suggests, are hypocritically racist and morally degenerate, intolerant of quadroon males but highly interested in taking quadroon women as paid concubines.

The exchange between Keene and Frowenfeld allows Cable to launch his criticism of the Creoles early in the book, and the scene also gives him room to remind readers that race operates according to a different set of rules in New Orleans. The latter idea is important to the workings of the rest of the scene. If Charlie Keene is a not-too-trustworthy guide to New Orleans, his pronouncement about the difference of racial practice in the city still alerts the reader to the fact that there is something strange about the way race is made and read in New Orleans, even if the morally wayward Creoles are responsible for much of that strangeness. But Cable's critical design against the Creoles begins to backfire some lines later as he starts to argue for the power of their charm. Frowenfeld begins to veer from a state of puzzlement over Keene's attitudes toward a state of pleasant incomprehension. Keene's narration takes on a lulling quality that moves Frowenfeld from bewilderment to attraction. He becomes simultaneously repelled and romanced by New Orleans' strange environs. As Keene's narration grows progressively complicated, it takes on "a light of romance […] that filled it with color and populated it with phantoms" (15). Frowenfeld is enchanted, drawn into Keene's story

despite his inability to comprehend it; his "interest rose – was allured into this mist – and there was left befogged" (15). By now, Cable has himself begun to mystify the practices of race-making in New Orleans. Frowenfeld's initial concern over Keene's remarks has slipped toward a slightly intoxicated feeling, seemingly in response to Keene's ongoing narration of the strangeness of racial practice in New Orleans, proving that the incomprehensibility of this system has the power to enchant.

The scene is only one example of Cable's habit of conflating moral vacuity with heady charm and the illegibility of racial practice in New Orleans. If the link between the first two elements is already a familiar representation, Cable's gesture toward a strange, muddied practice of race in New Orleans reveals a key root of the representation. Although Frowenfeld's moral compass points north in his initial response to Keene's anecdote, Keene's shrugging remark provokes a shift in Frowenfeld toward a feeling of enchantment with the place and people of New Orleans that fails to take the matter of racial tension seriously. In sending the otherwise grounded Frowenfeld down this dreamy path, Cable does several things. First, he suggests that something about New Orleans has the power to allure and attract otherwise rational and morally upright people. This city disorients newcomers, especially Anglo-American newcomers like Frowenfeld. Second, Cable hints that white Creole New Orleanians, here represented by Keene, are among those who can facilitate these dreamy journeys; in fact, they are somewhat corrupt themselves, giving in, as they do, to excuses for racial intolerance. Third, Cable fails to register a clear position on the matter of enchantment over, versus serious appraisal of, racial construction in New Orleans. Although Frowenfeld eventually rights himself in

the ensuing scenes and begins to argue outright for racial equality in New Orleans, coming closer to Cable's purported intentions for the book, Cable doesn't critique his surrender to the mystique of Keene's narration in this early scene. Instead, Cable himself seems to delight in describing the foggy romance to which Frowenfeld succumbs, a seduction compelled by, to borrow from Keene's language, the curiousness of blood. In romancing, rather than assessing, the social practices associated with race in New Orleans, Cable offers us a direct view of one of the foundational ideas driving the representation of exotic New Orleans: the notion that racial hybridity both seduces and threatens white Americans. And if Cable reveals this root of the representation, he doesn't critique it – at least not in this scene. Instead, his decision to leave Frowenfeld "befogged" is itself a capitulation to the notion that racial hybridity confuses and attracts whites. In writing this romance, Cable performs the work with which we are familiar: he tells the story of a strange, not-quite-American New Orleans where degeneracy and charm coincide. And in explicitly referring to the curiousness of blood in New Orleans, Cable points to an overlooked root of the narrative of exotic New Orleans. The scene suggests that the idea of exotic New Orleans may be very much a notion constructed by white writers trying to reckon with the complex of racial practices that evolved from the city's unique emergence out of three flags of colonial rule.

Cable begins in this scene a process of mystifying – and, by default, collapsing – the complex history of race-making in New Orleans. Rather than clarify this history, Cable occludes it by focusing on the exotic – on quadroon balls, impotent and incoherent narrators, and seductive confusion. But if the strange, heady power at work in exotic

New Orleans is sometimes constructed as a product of inexplicable magic, its key point of reference may well be a meditation on the meanings and instability of race.

Cable sets *The Grandissimes* in 1803, immediately after the Louisiana Purchase, prompting his characters who identify as white Creoles to choose whether they will accept an American identity. In the novel, the protagonist Joseph Frowenfeld identifies as an American, unlike the rest of the novel's characters, who cling to a French identity despite the city's passage to American governance. Frowenfeld's work in the novel is to become the moral leader who critiques the Creoles' racism against free blacks and who argues, to use his own words, for caste equality. Appealing at one point to the principles of "American liberty," Frowenfeld critiques New Orleans' social order as "defective, dangerous, erected on views of human relations which the world is abandoning as false" (152). Championing the cause of caste equality, Frowenfeld offers his political sympathies to Honoré f.m.c. (a shorthand for *free man of color)* at one point by proclaiming, "[T]hat mixture of blood which draws upon you the scorn of this community, is to me nothing – nothing! And every invidious distinction made against you on that account I despise!" (107). Frowenfeld's invective against the racialized caste system of New Orleans suggests that he is the book's mouthpiece for political reform. His vision is emblematic of the changes Cable would like to see in Louisiana.

The setting offers Cable some distance from his contemporary New Orleans world, and it also affords him room to imply a series of parallels, so that his argument about post-purchase New Orleans can be read as allegorical claims about the post-Reconstruction South. His rhetoric of equality, for instance, is generated not only in the

interest of the novel's Afro-Creole characters, but also toward free black societies in his contemporary period. Another implication offered by the historical parallel is a critique against old guard southerners who resisted progressive social change in the post-Reconstruction period, as indicated by Cable's stance against traditionalist, misguided New Orleans Creoles in the novel. The name of one of Cable's most staunchly French-identified (and racist) Creoles, Agricola Fusilier, is a case in point. Agricola's name carries both agricultural and military valences, suggesting that he is part of an old political economy that needs to be transcended by more progressive politics. Agricola's racism and continual references to Frowenfeld as an "immigrant" and an "alien" indicate Cable's indirect critique that traditionalists make a backward move in distancing themselves from the ascending directions of social change.

Cable's plot indicates his interest in the tensions between Creoles and Americans, and the major action turns on the differences between each group's position on the politics of race and caste. Cable places his Creole characters in a position in which they must choose whether to abide by or resist what Cable considers to be the progressive politics of the new American government, represented by the occasional appearance of Governor Claiborne and more frequently by the novel's moral center, Joseph Frowenfeld. The most weighted choice is left to Honoré Grandissime, a "white" Creole character not to be confused with his quadroon half-brother of the same name. The former is the preeminent leader of the Grandissime family, the namesake of the text. With the family name riding on his actions, Honoré is torn between several competing interests, including family loyalty, suspicion of the moral degeneracy of his family's traditions, and financial

and moral interest in the American project. He understands the American project, with a businessman's acumen, to be the successor to power in the city, and he regards its ideals, often voiced through the mouthpiece of Frowenfeld, as a needed corrective to his family's racist attitudes. Eventually, Honoré accepts the clear-headed moral logic of Frowenfeld, and he chooses to adopt his ostensibly progressive American ideals. The signal of Honoré's change is his proposal of a controversial business partnership to his half-brother, Honoré f.m.c. Honoré's proposal to his brother elicits an expected horror from his family, but Cable writes the proposal as Honoré's redemption. Both Honoré and Frowenfeld are rewarded by the end of the book with thriving businesses and with marriage prospects involving a pair of French Creole women. The marriages represent a union of American and white Creole interests – but only once the American perspective has assumed leadership. In essence, Frowenfeld's decision to stay, prosper and lead in New Orleans is suggestive of a larger reconciliation. New Orleans accepts American advancements, and in turn, New Orleans is enfolded into the bosom of the nation.

While this storyline may seem progressive so far, Cable undermines its effectiveness by allowing Honoré to propose the merger without ever following through on it. Honoré f.m.c. is made a partner in the newly named firm Grandissimes Freres, but the details of the merger are never narrated once the proposal has been made. When we see Honoré f.m.c. again after the proposal, he has sailed to France to pursue Palmyre Philosophe, a Creole of color woman and major character, who rejects him. He then commits suicide. Cable's characterization of Honoré f.m.c. suggests that his failure to rise to success stems at least in part from an innate weakness of character. Honoré f.m.c.

is silent throughout much of the novel, appearing like a shadow figure on the periphery of scenes, often voiceless or difficult to understand. One of his earliest scenes is also a suicide attempt, in which, despite its dramatic tenor, Honoré f.m.c. is given no speaking lines. In this scene, Frowenfeld and Honoré happen upon Honoré f.m.c. while riding horses. Honoré sees his half-brother near a river, guesses his intentions, and rushes, with Frowenfeld, toward a rescue. Frowenfeld gets to the riverbank first, "seizing the unresisting f.m.c. firmly by the collar" (155). When Honoré arrives, he tells Frowenfeld to release his half-brother, who doesn't respond. Instead, "the silent man turned away his face with a gesture of shame" (155). The ensuing conversation between the brothers is written as description rather than dialog, and Honoré f.m.c. then departs the scene, having never said a word. When the two remaining men re-mount their horses, Honoré explains that his half-brother has promised not to try to kill himself again, and he also instructs Frowenfeld, who is peering in the direction that Honoré f.m.c. has taken in his departure, "Do not look after him" (155). Cable, himself following Honoré's directive, turns his attention back to the conversation between Honoré and Frowenfeld; we never discover any details, from the perspective of Honoré f.m.c., remarking on the aftermath of the rescue.

Although the scene is brief, it reveals Cable's habit of writing Honoré f.m.c. as a passive, voiceless character who lacks will as well as the capacity to explain himself. In the paragraphs that follow, Honoré assumes the role of translator, explaining his half-brother's desires and actions to Frowenfeld. Honoré identifies unrequited love as the immediate cause of Honoré f.m.c.'s suicide attempt, but he then contextualizes the affair

within a larger history of social injustice, seeming to blame, as the root cause of Honoré's afflictions, the claustrophobic caste system that keeps Honoré f.m.c. confined. Honoré tells Frowenfeld, "Yet what an accusation, my-de'-seh, is his whole life against that "caste" which shuts him up within its narrow and solitary limits!" (155). This explanation can be read in conjunction with Honoré's subsequent rant against the blight of slavery, which he calls "this morhal, political, commercial, social mistake!" that "…breeds a thousan' cusses that nevva leave home but jus' flutter-h up an' rhoost, my-de'-seh, on ow *heads*" (156). Here, Cable constructs a comparison between slavery and a caste system in New Orleans that puts Creoles of color in a tenuous position of little rights. The implication is that the freedoms of Creoles of color exist in name only; they don't occupy a truly fluid or empowered position in New Orleans society. The critique also works against the treatment of free blacks in the post-Reconstruction South of Cable's own time. Neither group, implies Cable, is truly empowered in its respective period, and the "caste" system that legitimates these racial hierarchies affects free blacks to a point of silencing them and even eliminating their will to live. White society, on the other hand, suffers mysterious "cusses" that haunt – likely feelings of guilt.

Despite the rhetoric voiced through both Frowenfeld and Honoré, Cable's construction of the scene demonstrates the novel's failure to recognize a legitimate position for its Creole of color characters. Honoré f.m.c. remains passive and voiceless, unable to speak for himself while the white characters present assume the active roles. His motives must also be translated to the reader by a white character. Cable's assessment that social hierarchies tend to silence black voices of protest may have

ground, but his implication that suicide is the eventual result overreaches and erases the possibility of agency. Honoré f.m.c. may be pitiable because social hierarchies have constrained him, but his lack of will and his muteness also suggest a deeper deficiency of character that cannot be overcome. Lacking a voice and the will to live, Honoré f.m.c. could likely never assume a social role more powerful than his current position of landlord if given one; in fact, Cable seems to come to that conclusion by the book's end.[8] He ultimately writes Honoré f.m.c. out of the novel via a successful suicide attempt.

In erasing Honoré f.m.c. from the story and constructing his exit as owing at least in part to his weakness of character, Cable creates a version of New Orleans that achieves American identity only as it maintains white social dominance. Honoré Grandissime adopts the progressive values of the Americans and risks the proposal of a business partnership with his half-brother, but the partnership never truly materializes; instead, Honoré f.m.c. disappears from the novel completely, unable to assume a role of greater power. Although Cable at first seems to propose that New Orleans' acceptance into the nation can only occur if social empowerment happens across the board, the suicide of Honoré f.m.c. seriously compromises this initial proposal. The social hierarchy doesn't shift or budge. Already-powerful white Creoles and white Anglo-Americans remain in power; the status quo maintains equilibrium. Only the rhetoric is progressive. It is no

[8] Karsten Piep comes to a similar conclusion in a 2003 article, arguing that Cable's portrayal of Honoré f.m.c.'s passivity "forestalls from the outset any hope for black self-emancipation" (181). Piep argues that Cable's character construction is in keeping with his Southern liberalism, which must overcome both a Southern aristocracy and the key weaknesses Cable associates with a black underclass, namely "servility, ignorance, and cowardice" (Cable 143). Cable, Piep maintains, is not after a revolutionary overhaul of existing social structures, but is instead founded in a sense of reform that stresses the "moral and political leadership of [a] liberal white middle class" and "preaches [Cable's] Protestant gospel of gradual black self-improvement" (179).

coincidence that by the novel's end, the two other major mixed race characters have also exited. Palmyre Philosophe has sailed to Bordeaux, France, and taken up permanent residence there. Clemence, a street vendor who sells cakes, has been murdered at the hands of a group of Grandissime men. The removal of all three major mixed race characters from the novel, just before Cable wraps up with a happy ending, is highly suspect, and his timing implies a conflation of American identity with the maintenance of deeply unfortunate social hierarchies that privilege whiteness.

Although *The Grandissimes* ultimately capitulates to the assumptions of the racialized caste system that it wants to critique, Cable does make some interesting, though certainly limited, strides forward along the way. Clemence, for example, is constructed throughout the novel as a tool for critiquing white racism. Her astuteness is especially evident in one scene in which she banters with Dr. Charlie Keene and a group of white Creoles. She says to Keene, "'Well now, Mawse Charlie, I gwan t' ass you a riddle. If dat is *so* [that slavery isn't practiced in Europe], den fo' w'y I yeh folks bragg'n 'bout de 'stayt o' s'iety in Eu'ope?'" Her identification of the question as a riddle is telling, for she understands that her audience will not be able to give her a logical answer. Nor, in calling her question a "riddle," does she provoke them to answer her or even take her seriously. Instead, she frames her critique as wry comedy, and it is greeted as such accordingly. "A peal of laughter" is the response from her audience. Clemence, playing along, continues: "'I gwan tell you…'tis becyaze dey got a 'fixed wuckin' class.'" Her response, though deft, is understood as a sort of punchline, and Clemence responds in kind by playing down her own intelligence and seemingly humbling herself: "'Oh, ole

Clemence kin talk proctah, yass!'" Although Clemence plays along with the expectation that she is more comic than critic, she knows that the joke is not on her, but on her audience. Her final lines in the exchange assume a more serious tone that solidifies her implicit political intentions earlier in the dialogue. She says,

> "Oh…white folks is werry kine. Dey wants us to b'lieb we happy – day *wants to b'lieb* we is. W'y, you know, dey 'bleeged to b'lieb it – fo' dey own cyumfut. 'Tis de sem wid de preache's; dey buil' we ow own sep'ate meet'n-houses; dey b'leebs us lak it de bess, an' dey *knows* dey lak it de bess." (250-51)

Clemence's opening phrase is carefully constructed to palliate her meaning. After playing to the ego of her audience by stressing the kindness of white folks, Clemence offers her critique of white separatism, softening her blow but still delivering incisive commentary.

In her final scene, Clemence again indirectly critiques white racism, this time while pleading for her life by echoing the racist sentiments she expects her tormentors, the Grandissime men, to hold. When the men threaten her with hanging, she replies, "'I ain' wuth hangin', gen'lemen; you'd oughteh jis' gimme fawty an' lemme go…. You musn' b'lieve all dis-yeh nonsense 'bout insurrectionin'; all fool-nigga talk. W'at we want to be insurrectionin' faw? We de happies' people in de God's worl'!'" (321-22). Clemence's plea is designed to appeal to the men's assumption of her worthlessness, to mediate toward a punishment that incorporates their terms, and to parrot their belief that black people are happy in subordinate positions. Her statements are strategic, as in the

earlier scene, but this time geared fully toward a mimicry that in no way reflects her own position. Interestingly enough, Cable constructs Clemence as expecting the white Creoles to have heard about talk of insurrection. However, it is unlikely that talk of insurrection has contributed to their interest in killing her. Instead, the men suspect her involvement in the attempted murder of Agricola Fusilier. Thus Clemence's remark is designed to indicate her knowledge of and likely participation in contemporary political resistance movements. If the rest of her complaint is based on un-truths, her protests that she isn't an insurrectionist are likely false as well. More than likely, Cable is here culling sympathy for her while also solidifying his characterization of her political resistance.

Despite her pleas, and despite the sympathies of some of the white Creoles who eventually try to free her, Clemence is killed at the end of the scene. Her death, along with Palmyre's self-imposed exile and Honoré f.m.c.'s suicide, marks the text as lacking a place for the sustained development of an Afro-Creole culture. Although Cable's novel talks the talk of social equality, rhetoric seems largely to be the limit. Cable's ending represents the city's Afro-Creole culture as a relic of a foreign, non-national past. Had he ended *The Grandissimes* on a tragic note, his removal of the three main Afro-Creole cultures could have served as a warning for the severity of racial injustice. But Cable finishes the story in a place of happy romance and domestic union, leaving little room for effective critique. Instead, the novel's conclusion hints at a story of national reconciliation, in which the questionable space of New Orleans, represented in part by the once-vacillating, but now converted Honoré Grandissime, has accepted the American-minded ideals of racial equality and is rewarded with impending marriage. Frowenfeld,

in turn, has also moved toward marriage, and his union signals a larger sentiment of New Orleans' white Francophone culture merging with an Anglo-American identity. Frowenfeld's prosperity indicates that Anglo-American economic leadership will head the development of the city, as will its ideals, as voiced through the persuasive mouthpiece of Frowenfeld. Despite the erasure of the city's Afro-Creole culture, or perhaps because of this erasure, New Orleans can move toward union with national norms.

Not only does *The Grandissimes* propose nationalist reconciliation at the same time that it proposes the erasure of Afro-Creole culture, but the text also ignores the active work of Afro-Creole leaders in Cable's time. Cable's black Creole characters lack the leadership skills and community-mindedness of their real-life counterparts. Honoré f.m.c., largely silent and peripheral, clearly lacks their political agency. If Clemence's criticisms are insightful, they also lack the high degree of literacy and effectiveness that did characterize the short-lived but significant success of Afro-Creole newspapers like *L'Union* and *La Tribune* that were contemporary to the novel. Clemence may be a critical tool for Cable, but she hardly bespeaks the sophisticated rhetoric and organization that drove the protests of New Orleans' Creole of color leaders. Considering that *The Grandissimes* was published in 1880, we might argue that it helped prime the path for decisions like *Plessy* that would follow in the next decade. In implying the death and the foreignness of their culture, Cable eulogized the Creoles of color – some years before *Plessy* formally de-legitimated their social position, before racial binaries had fully hardened in New Orleans. It is hardly a stretch to argue that Cable's novel, which was

popular enough to launch a national book tour in which Cable headlined with Mark Twain, delivered a strong message about the inviability of Afro-Creole culture on a grand scale. Already de-legitimated in literary representations, real-life Creoles of color could very well have faced a large-scale social assumption that they had already vanished.

Writing a eulogy for a culture that still exists is not an uncommon practice in American literature. The strategy behind this tactic, according to Scott Malcomson, is linked with building a national identity. The "vanishing Indian" myth is emblematic of this practice, in which white Americans expressed sentiments of identification with Native Americans in the early decades of the 19th century while they simultaneously acquiesced to the wholesale disruption, and often destruction, of Native American culture. Malcomson writes:

> In finally becoming a unified white nation, and in making the transition from nomadic, uprooted struggle to a rough stability, this portion of the American people had to begin the process of losing a part of itself – the part that was free and mobile and an aspect of nature rather than its subjugator. It had both to honor this part of itself and to kill it. For this nascent racial and national collective, radical individual freedom and mobility had to be tamed and made past. The imaginative figure for this historical act was the Indian. A changing idea among white people about themselves created a new Indian, wild, free, glorious, unalterably separate in racial terms, and doomed to extinction. To this end, the drama of

> miscegenation had to be played out, in the popular imagination, both to integrate and to reject the foreign, Indian element. (62)

Cable's work in *The Grandissimes* is similar. Cable didn't create "a new Indian, wild, free, glorious" and "unalterably" a racial other, but he did something very similar with both his white Creole and his Creole of color characters. He cast an aura of romance around them, emphasizing their strange, magical qualities. The white Creole might not find a place in Cable's new national mold very easily, but he would be remembered for his fascinating qualities. He could, according to Cable, "make himself as young as need be," and he "possessed the rare magic of drawing one's confidence without seeming to do more than merely pay attention" (36). In a slightly different vein, Cable constructed a doomed set of Afro-Creole characters whose attractive strangeness might be only apparent in the case of Palmyre Philosophe (whom I will discuss in greater detail shortly), but whose very right to exist and prosper was argued by Cable's extensive rhetoric regarding racial equality. Like the doomed imagined Indian of Judge Joseph Story who "seem destined to a slow, but sure extinction" and who would vanish poetically with "rustling…footsteps, like that of the withered leaves of autumn" (qtd. in Malcomson 65), Cable's tragic Afro-Creole characters allowed him both to honor an oppressed culture into his narrative of New Orleans' transition to American identity and simultaneously to dismiss this culture as an unsustainable element in the newly American city. False representations of this culture as weak and ineffective allowed him to build his case, and these representations also lent to his rhetoric a false air of generosity, an olive branch offered to an expiring group of people. What Cable seems not to have

realized, however, is that his own imagined olive branch could very well have contributed to the group's eventual, formal de-legitimation.

The contrast between Cable's intentions for *The Grandissimes* and the text's implications make the book something of a riddle. Leaning heavily on a rhetoric for racial equality as voiced through the mouthpiece of his American narrator Joseph Frowenfeld, Cable later wrote, "'I meant to make *The Grandissimes* as truly a political work as it ever has been called… as plain a protest against the times in which it was written as against the earlier times in which its scenes were set'" (qtd. in Ladd 37-8). In its time, *The Grandissimes* was considered controversial, not least by Cable's editors, whose "strangling" of Cable has been well documented, as in Edmund Wilson's *Patriotic Gore.* Most of their criticisms involved the novel's free black characters, whom Cable's publishers critiqued as alternately "'inartistic,'" "'implausible'" and "'partisan'" (qtd. in Kreyling xiv). Although editor Robert Underwood Johnson eventually praised Cable for his "brave words" once the novel was published, his commentary along the way to publication demonstrated much anxiety over Cable's politics that was frequently couched in criticism of Cable's literary style. Wrote Johnson, "'I must say that the f.m.c. is to me the least interesting part of your story'" (qtd. in Kreyling xiv). Despite the concerns of his publishers, however, Cable's controversial scenes and characters remained largely intact (Kreyling xv). Twentieth century critics have championed Cable for his progressivism, if also acknowledging the author's capitulation to racial stereotyping in the novel. But perhaps more counter to his purpose than his use of racial stereotypes is

Cable's ultimate whitening of New Orleans by the end of the text, despite his emphasis on civil rights for free blacks.

Cable clearly maintains the status quo of white social dominance by dispelling the Afro-Creole characters from the finally Americanized New Orleans, but more subtly, he also betrays a belief in whiteness as a stable racial identity in his construction of the dubiously "white" Creole characters. Cable has mixed feelings about this group throughout the text. Although they are depicted with fanciful, exotic characteristics, they are also cast as morally degenerate. They are critiqued for having "a scorn of toil" (37), among other flaws, and Honoré Grandissime is singular in his ability to maintain an authoritative position within the group while still maintaining a sense of integrity. For Cable, the group's most reprehensible flaw seems to be racism, which ultimately results, in the case of Clemence's death, in murderous violence. But Cable also insinuates, in his construction of the group's lineage, that miscegenation may be a reason for their moral decay. Cable writes a Native American ancestor into the family tree of the Grandissimes, and while he may have intended to demonstrate the hypocrisy of the Creoles' racism by revealing their own likely mixed-blood lineage, Cable also implies, through character construction, that mixed-blood identity itself is a taint. The "white" Creoles of *The Grandissimes* display faults common to racial stereotypes, including indolence, moral degeneracy and unthinking aggression. These characters stand in contrast to the clear-headed, hard-working and diplomatic Honoré, who is able to overcome these limitations. In setting up such distinctive differences between his characters, Cable plays all too easily into the tenets of the American project. Certainly, New Orleans can assimilate into

the nation, Cable seems to suggest. But only if its citizens demonstrate an acceptable degree of whiteness.

Although Cable purportedly argued for racial equality in his novel, or equality of caste, as he called it, *The Grandissimes* articulates a way of thinking about race that is highly invested in maintaining the security, stability and superiority of whiteness. Cable reveals this investment by situating New Orleans, in the early pages of the novel, on the cusp of accepting American identity, as a city of strange and threatening environs. In doing so, and in emphasizing the charm and degeneracy of the "white" Creoles, as well as the tragic nature of the doomed Creoles of color, Cable sets the stakes for his argument about New Orleans' placement in the national project; he offers the reader an exotic landscape whose merger into national norm seems highly improbable. The city's exoticism, as demonstrated by the strangeness of both the place and the people, creates dramatic tension for Cable; the reconciliation of New Orleans into the space of the nation will need to overcome strong resistances. This reconciliation eventually happens, as signaled by Frowenfeld's success, Honoré's business proposal to Honoré f.m.c. and the impending marriages of both Honoré and Frowenfeld, but it also excises non-white elements from the city's social fabric. New Orleans does achieve American identity, following the ostensibly progressive vision of the nation, but only as it stabilizes and secures the status quo of white leadership.[9]

[9] See Ladd, who argues that late 19th century characters "who were not 'universal,' which more often than not meant characters who were not white and middle-class Americans or did not aspire to be" were often excised from texts or otherwise "subordinated or transcended as part of the 'atmosphere' or 'color' of the work, by the discourse of 'whiteness,' with all its suggestions of national unity and personal integrity" (84). Perhaps even more to the point, Cable himself directly states his interest in keeping racial categories

Despite Cable's seeming assessment that New Orleans has been reconciled within the national fabric by the book's end, his emphasis on the city's strangeness seems to have become, judging from successive representations, the more persuasive narrative thread. Cable encodes this strangeness in a series of moves that have since become particular to representations of New Orleans. These codes include a disoriented white stranger, an emphasis on the charm and degeneracy of persons and/or place, and the utilization of evocative descriptive metaphors – which in sum total encode an anxiety over racial hybridity and an investment in maintaining the status quo of white social dominance. Although Cable creates these codes perhaps as a way of showing the steep transition involved in the city's progression toward an American identity, they seem to have become a sort of literary blueprint for later representations of the city. Whereas Cable emphasizes New Orleans' strangeness in order to create dramatic tension, to show what must be overcome on the way to American identity, and to relegate this strangeness to a dead and foreign past, the charged atmosphere of the exotic city remains powerful. Cable may have tried to write a model for assimilating that strangeness into the national fabric, but judging from ensuing representations, widespread acceptance of his argument has hardly been the result. Perhaps Cable's own literary inheritance played some role in the matter. If Cable tried to reconcile New Orleans' preceding history of representation into a more nationally normative vein, perhaps his own romancing of the city reflects an inheritance from earlier texts that he was unable to overwrite.

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exclusive and thus perpetuating the status quo of white social dominance when he argues for "national unity without hybridity" in *The Negro Question* (130).

Consciously or not, Cable had to grapple with earlier representations of exotic New Orleans, such as Joseph Holt Ingraham's novel *The Quadroone; or St. Michael's Day*, published in 1840. *The Quadroone* is one of the earliest novels to approach the topic of racial mixing in a New Orleans setting, and, perhaps unsurprisingly, it relies on an exotic flavor of the city. The New Orleans of this novel is sensationalistic and bears little resemblance to the actual city. Ingraham frequently relates the "Oriental" details of the city, especially in his descriptions of the rooms in which the three main quadroon characters live. These rooms seem more mythic than real. When the young Spanish hero Don Henrique first surveys one of the rooms, he observes its:

> rich and luxurious decorations of ivory, marble and ebony; its hangings of damask, and divans of blue and crimson silk; […] the moonbeams giving just enough light to enable him to discern these, and appreciate the Oriental elegance of everything around him – the beauty of the inner court, with its snow-white columns, its foliage and flowers; the fragrance of the lemon and citron trees that loaded the air; the clear ringing of the falling fountain, and the voice of a mocking-bird that at the moment filled the court with the melodious warbling which, in that pleasant southern land, he ever hails the midnight moon, all entranced his senses and filled his heart with joy. (81)

The spectacle of wonderment that Ingraham creates as the domestic setting for his quadroon characters is again repeated in the second volume of the novel, when the antagonist, Count Osma, visits the same apartments. He sees "ottomans, lounges, and

fauteils of crimson velvet and silk, with carpets from Turkish looms," and although Osma is "not unused to luxury," he had "scarce beheld in Spain more splendor than now flashed upon his eyes" (64).

As indicated by the passage above, the mixed-race characters in Ingraham's novel are associated with sensuousness, a taste for exotic refinements, and splendor. They are also associated with foreignness, as signaled by the modifier "Oriental." If foreignness and charm indicate Ingraham's interest in an exotic construction of mixed-race characters and their environs, this strangeness is further intensified by Ingraham's insistence on an inherent wickedness of the quadroon characters. The novel tracks four characters whom we might identify as quadroons. Two of these, Azelie and Renault, are heroic, but the novel reveals them to be of noble white lineage by the book's end. The two "true" quadroon characters, Ninine and Jules, are consistently described as manipulative and cruel. Ninine's malevolence is especially steep; she murders, swaps infants, swindles a child from another woman's care, and repeatedly tries to promise a weeping Azelie into unwanted arrangements of concubinage. The result of Ingraham's descriptions and intrigue is a set of associations not unfamiliar to readers of *The Grandissimes* – a conflation of notions of heady charm, moral degeneracy and racial hybridity that is identified as foreign.

If Ingraham delivers a familiar brew of exoticism, he also, like Cable, attempts a half-hearted protest of the rights of quadroons to civil liberties. Azelie is the primary spokeswoman of the argument for her group's entitlement to lawful marriage over concubinage. Azelie, believed to be a quadroon throughout most of the novel, laments

her inability to marry lawfully, especially after falling in love with the Spanish prince Don Henrique. She elicits the reader's sympathy, complaining that "quadroone" "is another name for degradation, both moral and physical. …the quadroone is a slave both in body and soul!" Azelie's protest largely concerns the inability of quadroons to experience fully requited love. As concubines, quadroon women must elicit the passion of upper class white males in order to gain patronage, but any feelings of love must be "crushed in the bud of the heart, or be cherished to ripen into sensuality" (97). Ingraham's emphasis on Azelie's virtuousness might suggest an argument in favor of the rights and moral character of racially mixed persons. But if Ingraham considers this idea through the pitiable complaints of Azelie, he also, like Cable, capitulates to a plot move that fails to support his rhetoric. He dismisses Azelie's arguments fully by the end of the novel when he reveals that she, as well as her honorable brother Renault, is in fact white. The racial "reveal" allows Ingraham to end his novel with a pair of marital unions that wouldn't disturb anti-miscegenation sentiments among his readers, and it also reinscribes racial stereotypes that explain virtue and honor as attributes of whiteness, and baseness and malevolence as evidence of a racial taint.

If Ingraham precedes Cable in his specific, racialized brew of exoticism, as well as his thwarted political arguments that ultimately privilege whiteness, he also imparts the city with a magical flavor. A "sorceress" haunts the book, appearing at key moments throughout the text to whisper soothing words of salvation to Azelie and to make outright threats that strike deep fear in her antagonists. No one can identify the sorceress, although she knows the names and secrets of many characters in the novel. It is because

of her mysterious knowledge, her ability to enter into heavily guarded rooms unarmed, and her appearance as "a tall figure, wrapped to the mouth in a large gray mantle…which swept the ground, its head nearly buried in a deep cowl, through which glared… a pair of glittering eyes, like the burning orbs of a tigress shining in the dark" (125), that she is deemed a "sorceress," and imagined to have a host of mystical powers. Count Osma refers to her practice of "unholy arts" and asks at one point, "Woman, hast thou power over the dead?" (136). She replies at length in the affirmative. Although at the end of the novel she is revealed to be not a sorceress but a former slave, whose knowledge of secrets is the largely the result of former associations that the novel's villains have forgotten, she maintains a power of enchantment over many of the main characters, and her uncanny appearances direct the dramatic tension of several key scenes in the book. Her magic and mystery are central to the story's momentum.

The Quadroone, according to James Kinney, "stresses the foreignness of New Orleans" (41) in order to create a sense of distance through which Ingraham could explore the taboo topic of racial mixing with great imaginative freedom. If Kinney is correct, then there is, by the 1840s, an associative relationship already established between the foreignness of New Orleans and its Afro-Creole culture, as represented by a white literary imagination. Cable's reference to the "hybrid city of 'Nouvelle Orleans'" in the early pages of *The Grandissimes* (11) may, in fact, point to this association. But the linking of racial hybridity with foreignness isn't Ingraham's only lasting legacy. He seems to have developed a series of codes for representing New Orleans' Afro-Creole culture from a perspective that privileges whiteness. For readers of *The Grandsimmes,*

the method is familiar. It involves linking racial hybridity not only with foreignness, but also with seduction, aesthetic refinement and moral degeneracy. Additionally, it disavows serious discussion of the legitimacy of mixed-race characters and instead insists that virtue and nobility are qualities only of whiteness. The code also constructs an elaborate smokescreen of magical elements that contributes added force to the notion of New Orleans' foreignness and charm. His emphasis on the lush, exotic landscapes outside the quadroons' apartments evokes this charm in a heady manner.

If Ingraham's exotic New Orleans anticipates Cable's solidification of a narrative standard, he is also credited by Kinney with establishing "in American literature the convention of quadroon concubinage in New Orleans and develop[ing] many of the literary details associated with the practice" (41). As we shall see shortly, Inghraham's representations of quadroon women are echoed in Cable's construction of Palmyre. According to Kinney, Ingraham's novel is the first in which New Orleans becomes "the accepted setting for enforced concubinage," and literary works in this vein usually incorporate heroines who protest their concubinage, preferring "death before dishonor." Not only are the women of these tales depicted as virtuous, but they are also tremendously beautiful, and their position as victims of abject sexual passions is written as pitiable. Kinney notes that when "an evil slave dealer mentions New Orleans in connection with a beautiful slave, he does so with a leer, and the knowing reader gasps at the enticing horror of the slave's fate" (42). Although the revelation of the white identity of *The Quadroone*'s Azelie makes her difficult to classify as a mixed-race character – since her virtuousness, judging from Ingraham's other character constructions, is

probably a reflection of her noble white lineage – she does, for most of the storyline, fit Kinney's mold of the beautiful, virtuous, victimized woman of mixed-race. She is thus at least a forerunner of several successive tragic mixed-race female characters in New Orleans literature that precede Cable's work.

One of Azelie's earliest successors is Zoe, the virtuous octoroon heroine of Dion Boucicault's melodramatic play *The Octoroon; or Life in Louisiana* (1859), who chooses suicide over the prospect of submitting to the ownership of McClosky. Victim to the abject passions of a cruel character named McClosky, who is unable to attract her attention through courtship, Zoe is eventually sold to him. McClosky manipulates the sale of her just-beyond-New Orleans estate, of which she is a part, so that he can buy her. Rather than take her chances with McClosky's base desires, Zoe poisons herself. H. L. Hosmer's *Adela, The Octoroon* (1860) shares similar narrative designs, in that Adela too is purchased by a cruel male character, Westover, who fails to court her and thus engineers the ruin and sale of her estate so that he can buy her. Adela, too, is a virtuous, beautiful woman who, like Zoe, is orphaned by a white father, but unlike Zoe, she eventually escapes to California, where she marries. A striking difference in Hosmer's novel is the depiction of the New Orleans auction block as a space where mixed-race women are sold into, as *Adela* explicitly states, prostitution. The threat of this sale occurs for several characters in the novel, and eventually the threat is realized for a character named Zilpha, who actually seeks to be auctioned in order to be bought by a handsome white man whom she presumes will see her, rush to buy her, and then dote on her

lavishly. Although she is nearly sold to a brutish man, her sale to a more suitable man finally ensues.

Like their forerunners, sisters Rosabella and Floracita Royal, the mixed-race heroines of Lydia Maria Child's *A Romance of the Republic* (1867), are exceedingly virtuousness and compelling beautiful, though the racial revelation of Child's novel uncovers their mixed-race lineage. Also orphaned by the sudden death of their white father, the sisters discover that their mother was a slave whom their father had neglected to manumit. His death uncovers not only the surprise of their racial make-up, but also the fact that they are, by law, slaves who can be sold to meet the demands of their father's creditors – a narrative design quite similar to what we see in *Adela*. As for the novel's portrayal of New Orleans, the city is written as a place that must be escaped, or else the girls will face a cruel fate on the auction block.

If Azelie helps to establish a tradition of tragic quadroon characters in New Orleans literature, neither she nor her immediate successors is the model for either of the mixed-race female characters in Cable's *The Grandissimes.* There is no "reveal" and no death of a misguided but well-meaning white father to suggest the pitiable vulnerability of either Clemence or Palmyre. In Clemence's case, there is also no trace of sexuality and no description of beauty in her characterization. The tragedy of Clemence's death marks a progressive step up for Cable from his literary predecessors; Clemence's death is tragic not because she is beautiful and nearly-white, but because she is keenly aware of race matters and resistant to the racism of her time. But while Clemence's characterization demonstrates Cable's progress, his construction of Palmyre Philosophe is

far more complicated, and ultimately disappointing. Palmyre, whose surname hints at an intelligence that Cable largely depicts only as cunning, possesses a compelling and dangerous beauty, and she is reminiscent less of Azelie or her successors, than of an admixture of Azelie's manipulative mother Ninene and the mysterious sorceress of *The Quadroone*, neither of whom is a model for a New Orleans-based literary heroine until we meet Palmyre.

Ninine's cruelty is indicated by many malicious actions that mark her contrast to a domestic ideal. As a jealous concubine, she fatally poisons her lover-patron's lawful wife. She later exchanges her child with the child of the dead wife, hoping to secure a legitimate social position for her son. Upon spying a beautiful female child on the lap of a slave in a slave market, she purchases both and then attempts to murder the slave, intending to foster the child's development into a successful concubine like herself. Once the female child (Azelie) is grown, Ninine works to arrange her patronage with ill-intentioned suitors despite Azelie's plaintive resistance. When Ingraham is not depicting Ninine as calculating or cruel, he shows her as irresistibly beautiful. Awaiting Count Osma, whose patronage she plans to secure for Azelie, she is shown reclining on one of Ingraham's lush velvety lounges, "the evening breeze just lifting the raven curls from her temples" (64). In the ensuing meeting, Ninine's use of her own seductive charm is key in persuading Osma to her goals. Ultimately, Ninine excels as a lover, but she is ill equipped to handle lawful roles such as wife or mother. She is driven by self-interest.

Palmyre shares Ninine's beauty and vindictiveness, and while Palmyre may have more integrity than Ninine, Cable isn't totally resolved to portraying her as a heroic

character. Palmyre is, after all, an unsuccessful murderess, though Cable does infuse some legitimacy into her character by explaining her attempted murder of Agricola Fusilier with extended references to his cruel treatment of her in the past. Palmyre also shares Ninine's compelling, if dubious, attractiveness. She is described as possessing "superb stature and poise, severely handsome features… passionate black eyes" (57). By age fourteen, Cable writes, Palmyre had already possessed "a barbaric and magnetic beauty, that startled the beholder like an unexpected drawing out of a jewelled sword" (60). If Palmyre's physical appearance is both compelling and threatening, it is merely the surface level of her dangerous and disturbing appeal. Cable tells us that Honoré Grandissime f.m.c. desires Palmyre fitfully enough to attempt suicide twice when he cannot have her. And even sober-minded Joseph Frowenfeld is haunted by a vision of her shifting the collar of her robe after he has tended to her wound. "It was many an hour" after his visit to tend her wounds, Cable writes, "before [Frowenfeld] could replace with more tranquilizing images the vision of the philosophe reclining among her pillows, in the act of making that uneasy movement of her fingers upon the collar button of her robe" (136). Although Cable is careful to stress in this scene that Frowenfeld has culled Palmyre's respect by acting unlike the majority of white men who "regarded her as legitimate prey," he also accentuates Frowenfeld's inability to escape the seemingly compulsory feeling of attraction toward Palmyre as she lies among her pillows. If Frowenfeld is affected, his search for more "tranquilizing" images indicates that the feelings are also unpleasant.

While Palmyre's murderousness and her disturbing beauty echo Ingraham's cruel Ninine, Cable, to his credit, also defends Palmyre's legitimacy to a degree by eliciting sympathy for her social position and by stressing her more heroic qualities. In addition to describing the "unmerciful world" in which Palmyre is regarded as "legitimate prey," Cable additionally identifies Palmyre as possessing "mental acuteness, conversational adroitness, concealed cunning and noiseless but visible strength of will; and to these, that rarest of gifts in one of her tincture, the purity of true womanhood" (60). These descriptions point to Cable's desire to depict Palmyre as a noble character, especially since she, unlike Ninine, is capable of fulfilling conventional female roles. But if Palmyre's "purity" marks her as a virtuous character, we cannot forget that Cable is ultimately possessed by contradictory impulses in her portrayal of her, so that she appears on the page as truly exotic, a sustained and anxious articulation of Cable's competing interests.

If Palmyre in part echoes Ingraham's Ninine, she also recalls his mysterious sorceress. Ingraham's technique with this character is to cast upon her a glamour of mystery, which is enhanced by her influence over other characters; she invokes great fear in antagonists Osma and Ninine while bringing comfort to the novel's romantic leads. Like the sorceress, Palmyre is also depicted through a smokescreen of mystery. Cable describes her as being known in New Orleans "for the efficiency of her spells and the sagacity of her divinations, but most of all for the chaste austerity with which she practiced the less baleful rites of the voudous" (60). Cable's emphasis on Palmyre's "sagacity" and his decision to temper her participation in strange magic by associating

her with chasteness and "less baleful rites" may indicate an urge to lessen the exoticism of her character, but he still casts a spell of mystery around her that, especially when coupled with descriptions of her "barbaric and magnetic beauty," do little to demonstrate her legitimacy as a character. Cable even goes so far as to de-humanize Palmyre. Just as Ingraham compares the sorceress' eyes to the eyes of a "tigress," so Cable searches to describe Palmyre's beauty and ends with animalistic imagery. He writes, "The united grace and pride of her movement was inspiring but – what shall we say? – feline? It was a femininity without humanity – something that made her with all her superbness, a creature that one would want to find chained" (71).

Ultimately, Cable's position on Palmyre is inconsistent, and he compromises his own ostensibly progressive goals for the novel in his construction of her. On one hand, Cable seeks to champion Palmyre's "true womanhood" and strength of will and to defend against the social forces that de-legitimate her position. On the other hand, he claims outright that Palmyre lacks humanity, and he accentuates this notion by conjuring around Palmyre a strange magic, exemplified in both her irresistible attractiveness and her practice of voodoo. Cable may indeed argue that social forces subvert Palmyre's legitimacy, but he also solidifies racialized stereotypes that undermine his argument, in effect leaving us with a riddle of a character who demonstrates racist authorial assumptions that the text simultaneously wants to challenge.

If Palmyre, along with Honoré f.m.c. and Clemence, represents New Orleans' *gens des coleurs libres,* then Cable, despite his intentions otherwise, argues against the viability of this group, as well as free blacks in the larger nation. In fact, if our allegorical

reading of New Orleans as a stand-in for the South continues through to the end of the novel, then the disappearance of all three major mixed race characters implies not only that they, as representatives of New Orleans' Afro-Creole culture, cannot be reconciled with the increasingly Americanized identity of New Orleans. Their removal also indicates Cable's sense of the impossibility of reconciling black Americans as empowered persons in the larger nation in his own time. In removing Palmyre, Honoré f.m.c. and Clemence, Cable also suggests that the nation is absolved from the need to recognize the legitimate social identity of Creoles of color because they are no longer a surviving culture. Considering the political work of the *Comite des Citoyens* in Cable's period, this implication is deeply misguided. Cable somehow overlooks, even with his zealous rhetoric of equality, the fact of political resistance by black Creoles in his time.

In exiling Palmyre to France, literally, to the metropole, Cable also implies the foreignness of New Orleans' Afro-Creole culture, which he cannot reconcile with the city's American identity. Palmyre's removal is the logical conclusion of the distancing maneuvers that Cable has constructed all along. Cable has stressed her metaphorical foreignness, her exotic qualities, throughout the text; dismissing her abroad is the natural outgrowth of his insistence on her difference. His construction of her as foreign is not original, however. Ingraham's novel also illustrates this tendency in its habit of placing mixed-race characters among "Oriental" settings. Likewise, neither Azelie and Renault is linked romantically to an American character. Instead, both find romance with Spanish nobles, allowing Ingraham to play out the drama of potential miscegenation in a space familiar to American readers, but not among American characters.

Cable inherits this habit of associating mixed-race characters with foreignness, as we see with the exile of Palmyre. In fact, Cable's mission in writing *The Grandissimes* appears to be driven in large part by his quest to assert the identity of New Orleans as a national space. Considering his early description of "hybrid city of 'Nouvelle Orleans,'" Cable was aware of the city's international reputation and flavor. Multiple details in the book suggest Cable's desire to reconcile New Orleans with an American identity. His setting of the book immediately after its passage to American control, his use of Frowenfeld as the mouthpiece for social reform, his emphasis on Frowenfeld's outsider status, and his eventual resolution, in which Honoré Grandissime accepts the progressive values of the Americans – all of these details point to Cable's interest in writing a novel that reconciles New Orleans into the national fabric. In order to write this transition, Cable stresses the strangeness and foreignness of certain elements of the city and then dismisses them. In part, Cable seems to want to emphasize and then transcend the cruelties of white Creole racism and the racialized caste system, as evidenced by the continual pronouncements of Frowenfeld in this direction and Honoré's evolution from the Creole system of values. However, in writing his way toward ostensibly progressive American values, Cable's dismissal of mixed-race persons as embodiments of the city's foreignness leaves us with a staggering absence and suggests an association between New Orleans, racial hybridity and foreignness that subsequent representations still employ.[10]

[10] See Ladd. She observes that octoroon characters in late 19th century literature were often depicted as "product[s] of a European-style and colonial class system, often superfluous both economically and politically, completely unsuited to the economic and political life of the U.S. republic" (20-21). Her observation here suggests that the association of mixed-race characters with foreignness reveals white writers' attempts to affirm their own exclusive rights to national identity.

Perhaps the contradictions inherent in Cable's text should not surprise us. Cable's literary inheritance left him to reckon with the reputation of a questionable space that, as Ingraham contends, had become a primary site in literature for the exploration of taboo themes associated with mixed-race persons and especially quadroon concubinage. Cable, in recuperating New Orleans from this heritage, negotiated among a mixture of forces: the challenge of reconciling with this literary inheritance, the demands of his publishers for a less controversial novel, and his own interests in the rhetoric of racial equality. These factors alone could have conspired to push the text in multiple, often contradictory, directions. At the same time, Cable's setting, New Orleans at the turn of the 19th century, necessitated the incorporation of elements that would by default seem strange to an Anglo-American audience. Cable, like his predecessors, infused many of these elements, namely the city's Francophone Creole cultures, with a sense of heady charm – perhaps a capitulation to audience expectations and desires or a fixedness to a literary tradition that Cable couldn't quite shake.

If *The Grandissimes* responded to multiple and often contradictory forces, its most unsettling contradiction is its dual push toward racial equality and toward a racial hierarchy that privileges whiteness. This contradiction may reflect the difference between New Orleans' tripartite racial order and the binary framework that defined race making throughout most of the rest of America. Cable, in arguing for the empowerment of the *gens des couleur libre,* would have been writing in favor of a racial identity that challenged the purity and dominance of whiteness. Rather than explain or defend the legitimacy of this group fully, Cable's solution was to embrace a progressive-sounding

rhetoric of racial equality and then evacuate himself from any serious consideration of the rights or identity of black Creoles. Cable back-pedaled. He initiated a move toward social change and then gave in to the larger social forces of his time that feared black empowerment and accepted a white-over-black racial hierarchy. His decisions weren't unusual. Despite the frequent appearance of sympathetic mixed-race characters in antebellum fiction, literature after Reconstruction often answered to a different set of needs that fit the terms of an increasingly racist US nationalism. Strong mixed-race characters did not fit the national mold when nationalism mandated a hierarchical racial framework.

The Grandissimes responded to this compendium of pressures. Cable's mixed-race characters reflect his multiple, contradictory aims. They express or create occasions for Cable's rhetoric of political critique, yet their elimination from the novel keeps the book in line with nationalistic demands of the period. Their exoticization, especially in the case of Palmyre, contributes to their diminishment and connects *The Grandissimes* to a literary inheritance that used mixed-race characters, to borrow from Ingraham, as a "titillative […] gimmick." Yet Cable also made advancements over his predecessors in his less exotic moments of rendering Clemence, Palmyre and Honoré f.m.c. In short, these characters allow Cable a very limited stride forward. Through them, he offers a social critique that ultimately does not upset the status quo because the novel ends with their erasure and thus abdicates any responsibility on the readers' behalf toward them or their real-life corollaries. Had Cable offered these characters roles that were active or

more truly subversive, his novel would not have fit within the framework of an emerging U.S. nationalism.

A social climate as fraught as nineteenth century New Orleans should perhaps have precipitated the emergence of a body of literature rife with complexity rather than contradiction. However, Cable's text is often singled out by critics as being unique in its attempt to balance a web of controversial social forces. Lewis Simpson is among those authors who point to Cable as a regional writer who rose above the shallowness of local color portrayals by trying to appraise the struggles that defined his social climate. Simpson illustrates the problem that plagued most representations by calling attention to a description that northern journalist Edward King used when he visited New Orleans in 1873. King described the city a "picturesque and unjust civilization" (qtd. in Simpson 81). For Simpson, the incongruent nature of these adjectives is the problem. Political responsibility is lost to a fetishizing gaze. But this is also the gaze of Americanization – and essentially the gaze of Cable. Cable ultimately embraces the viewpoint that privileges whiteness and that reads the living vestiges of the city's older, more flexible racial system – its quadroons and octoroons, mulattos and griffes, all of whom still occupied meaningful, though threatened, social positions within the not-quite-assimilated traffic of the city – with a mix of excitement, confusion and anxiety.

These feelings manifest in Cable's constructions of literary codes for writing about New Orleans. The innocence of the entering white stranger, the sense of danger and attraction that surround the city and its mixed-race inhabitants, the mixture of heady

charm with moral derangement and racial hybridity – each of these narrative features signals Cable's tendency to treat the idea of racial mixing as something exotic, a "titillative […] gimmick." Cable, despite his rhetoric to the contrary, offers a way of encoding white anxiety over racial hybridity in narrative form. If the racialized aspect of this code is often overlooked, it may be due to the elaborate smokescreen of charm cast by Cable and his successors, who tend to mystify the strangeness of New Orleans through a misdirection that insists upon a "something strange" about the city that resists identification. This "something strange," upon closer inspection, often does have racialized referents – as it does in the early scene in *The Grandissimes*, when Keene's narrations enchant Frowenfeld into a dreamy haze.[11] Cable's own emphasis on racial equality and political progressivism likewise obscures the anxious thrust of his narrative patterns. His rhetoric also obscures the significant coincidence in which the reconciliation of New Orleans with American progressivism occurs alongside the erasure of all major mixed-race characters.

Simpson and others applaud Cable for his uniqueness in taking up the themes of his day with considerable complexity. But Cable's work is more contradictory than complex or critical; it still maintains the status quo, and it is also responsible for drafting a blueprint of writing New Orleans that is both troublesome and influential. Through Cable's novel, literary New Orleans saw wider circulation than through many previous

[11] The racialized referents of New Orleans' strangeness are also emphasized in Cable's short story "Madame Delphine," which associates foreignness, enchantment and decay with racial hybridity. The first pages of the story describe at length "a squalor almost Oriental" about a section of the city in which "beauty lingers" (2). After describing more thoroughly the extensive charm and deterioration of a particular house, which Cable asserts is indeed inhabited, he explains the scene with "the simple key to the whole matter: 'Dey's quadroons'" (3-4).

and contemporary works. His codes have since become common to a certain way of mythologizing the city that reaches deep into twentieth century literature and culture. Cable's literary legacy includes a collection of narrative devices that encode racial anxieties – a tourist-like protagonist whose innocence can highlight New Orleans' strangeness; a dynamic of charm and decay, or attraction and danger, that lends an exotic flavor to textual environs and characters; and evocative metaphors that suggest an aura of wildness, magic and primitivism. His successors have frequently recycled these codes. For Cable, the narrative of exotic New Orleans isn't resolved with the violence and destruction of characters that marks its later constructions, perhaps because Cable's work is politically aimed to recover the city into the nation, or perhaps because his work is generated before racial categories fully harden, before the process of Americanization is quite complete. While Cable attempts to redeem foreign New Orleans into the American project, later literary works forego this aim, preferring instead to enjoy the city's position on the fringe of the nation, preferring to tout New Orleans as America's most exotic city.

Chapter Two: Desiring, Devouring: Tennessee Williams' New Orleans

> A fantastic garden which is more like a tropical jungle, or forest, in the prehistoric age of giant fern-forests when living creatures had flippers turning to limbs and scales to skin. The colors of this jungle-garden are violent, especially since it is steaming with heat after rain. There are massive tree-flowers that suggest organs of a body, torn out, still glistening with undried blood; there are harsh cries and sibilant hissings and thrashing sounds in the garden as if it were inhabited by beasts, serpents and birds, all of savage nature . . . .
>
> Tennessee Williams, *Suddenly Last Summer*

Tennessee Williams' opening scene notations for *Suddenly Last Summer* describe a New Orleans of extravagant and sensuous violence. The images are hardly believable. Williams transports us to a prehistoric age in which animals and humans seem to metamorphose before our very eyes. The scene is bloody, suggesting human dismemberment, and its noises are threatening. In this scene of bodily mutation and mutilation, of wild sounds and violent colors, Williams also inserts several key words to describe the landscape – forest, garden and jungle, each of which is used twice. His emphasis on these words intensifies the scene by hinting toward an impenetrability of the landscape, a sense of chaos. Williams' forest is prehistoric, dark and, as the first line suggests, jungle-like, and even the garden here gives way to the jungle. If the garden suggests a sense of lushness, then the image of the jungle that it becomes amplifies that lushness. If it is jungle-like, this garden must be overgrown, less a civilized space than a space of wildness and chaos, a tangle of greenery that serves as a backdrop to the

mutations, mutilations, noises and violent colors. Yet these scene notations provide the setting for the backyard of a home in New Orleans' elite Garden District neighborhood.

The thrust of the drama plays out William's suggestions that this Garden District setting is a place of threatening and unbridled savagery. In the play, the wealth and refinement of Garden District citizens mask their underlying carnivorous violence. Williams' reliance on a jungle atmosphere to suggest the tone of the drama agrees with a plot in which a matriarchal figure hotly pursues a lobotomy for her niece, whose knowledge of family secrets could undermine the matriarch's social position. Although the matriarch represents the top tier of New Orleans' society, the jungle metaphor implies that her civilized behaviors are only a veneer. A primal and devouring wildness lurks beneath the mask.

If Williams' use of the jungle metaphor reinforces his claim in *Suddenly Last Summer* that some areas and populations of New Orleans are home to an untempered wildness, the metaphor isn't unique to this drama. Williams also employs the figure of the jungle at length in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, another New Orleans-based drama. In one key scene, Blanche DuBois uses the metaphor to critique what she sees as the base, primal masculinity of her sister Stella's husband Stanley. "Thousands and thousands of years have passed him right by," she raves at Stella, "and there he is – Stanley Kowalski – survivor of the stone age! Bearing the raw meat home from the kill in the jungle!" (72).

Both instances mark brief but important descriptive moments in Williams' dramas, in which the sense of an unnavigable, excessive wildness that Williams summons in describing both setting and characters congeals into a key term, jungle. It is a term

with much evocative power, and its appearance in his New Orleans-based dramas is telling. Grounded in a word that conjures notions of sensual abandon and savage violence, the jungle metaphor acts as a convenient shorthand for Williams' repeated casting of New Orleans as an exotic setting, specifically as a setting for narratives that conflate desire with a brutality that often ends in destruction. In fact, Brian Peters notes that many of Williams' New Orleans-based works "reveal a connection between desire and violence: only through intense physical contact, often painful contact, are emotional connections forged" (110). Peters points particularly to the relationship between Stanley and Stella as an example of the "binary of desire/violence [. . .] that permeates many of the romantic entanglements" in Williams' work (110). The jungle metaphor efficiently evokes just this sense of desire mixed with chaos and violence. It allows Williams the freedom to vacillate between celebrating and condemning exotic New Orleans, and he uses the term both to conjure up a sensualist aesthetics and to provide critique. Despite the fact that the term "jungle" surfaces only on several occasions, the desire/violence dynamic that it signals is a key foundation of Williams' New Orleans-based works, in which his exploration of interracial and homosexual intimacies generates much dramatic tension.

If desire frequently meets violence in Williams' New Orleans-based works, that outcome suggests his uncertain attitude toward taboo intimacies, which excite both attraction and punitive treatment. His relationship to the city helps to explain this ambivalence. Williams writes that in New Orleans, "'I found the kind of freedom I had always needed. And the shock of it against the Puritanism of my nature has given me a

theme, which I have never ceased exploiting'" (qtd. in Paller 6). Specifically, according to his biographers, "New Orleans […] edged Williams closer to the recognition of his homosexuality" (Paller 6). Read in light of his use of the desire/violence binary, the comment suggests that Williams uses New Orleans as a site for grappling with contradictory feelings toward his own homosexuality. Outwardly, Williams contends here that the city is to be celebrated for permitting the exploration of taboo intimacies. Yet in his work, his continual insistence on drawing desire toward severely destructive ends, including rape and cannibalism, suggests Williams' own lack of reconciliation with his sexuality, as also indicated in his description of the city's "shock" against his nature. His ambivalence finds expression through various codes, including the jungle metaphor, and it is related to a sense of guilt that also motivates the desire/violence dynamic. Williams alludes to this guilt in his short story "Desire and the Black Masseur," in which he identifies abuse as a sort of penance for desire. He describes desire as evincing "incompletions" in one's character that must be made up for, and he writes that one method of resolution involves "atonement, the surrender of self to violent treatment by others with the idea of thereby clearing one's self of his guilt" (206). The idea that abuse redeems one from desire indicates not only that desire mandates punishment but also provides further proof of Williams' unresolved outlook toward homosexuality. His outlook demands that we read his depiction of abusive relationships with an eye toward their construction of taboo intimacies. It also implies that his view of New Orleans, as the location for his articulation of the desire/violence dynamic, is troubled and uncertain despite his outward affirmations of its freedom.

Williams follows George Washington Cable's *The Grandissimes* in depicting New Orleans through deeply troubling, overly codified narratives that frequently make use of alarmist racialized imagery, which Williams articulates in part through his jungle metaphor. These similarities indicate both authors' recognition of New Orleans' difference from national norms as a space where taboo intimacies are practiced. Whereas Cable worries over how to represent the city's racially mixed Creoles of color, however, who threaten his goal of arguing for New Orleans' conformity as an American space, Williams worries over representing homosexual and, to a lesser extent, interracial intimacies. Williams' jungle metaphor allows him to diverge from Cable in envisioning New Orleans as a more sensual, excessive and savage space, though both writers invest New Orleans with some degree of strangeness. However, Cable is interested in reconciling New Orleans with national interests and thus in limiting its strangeness, despite the fact that his novel does construct the city and its inhabits with a significant degree of romance. Williams, on the other hand, exacerbates New Orleans' exoticism. His metaphor registers both fascination and anxiety over the city's permissiveness, which ultimately brings about the destruction of persons who transgress normative social boundaries of race and sexuality. The result is a space still imagined through racialized narratives as peripheral to national norms, yet it is a far more enticing and destructive space than Cable's New Orleans.

In a move that echoes Cable's work in *The Grandissimes*, Williams introduces New Orleans in *Streetcar* as a space that is strange for its acceptance of intimacies between black and white New Orleanians. Whereas Cable exoticizes hybridity in mixed-

race characters, however, Williams points to New Orleans' defiance of the norms of social and residential segregation as the reason for its strangeness. In failing to conform to the period's social norms that demanded racial separatism, Williams' New Orleans stands apart from the national mainstream. Its singularity is made apparent from the play's outset. In the opening scene, two neighbors, a white woman named Eunice and her unnamed "colored" neighbor are "taking the air" on the steps outside a residential building. Williams' ensuing explanation for their interaction points to his awareness that the scene is unusual. He remarks in his staging directions on New Orleans' special quality as "a cosmopolitan city where there is a relatively warm and easy intermingling of races in the old part of town" (13). In *staging whiteness*, Mary Brewer writes that the neighbors' interaction signals to the audience "that the characters reside in an(other) space compared to normative U.S. society" (72). Williams' language here indicates that he reads the city's difference positively.

Yet he also subjects the city's difference to a more troublesome exoticization. Williams' stage directions indicate that a turquoise background sky "invests the scene with a kind of lyricism and gracefully attenuates the atmosphere of decay" (13). The description matches a sense of charm against a sense of degeneracy, thus undermining the positive elements of the space by matching them against a pervading sense of decline. This description is more than mere scene setting: Williams' next lines align the city's sense of decay and charm with the music of black performers. Williams writes that a "corresponding air is evoked by the music of Negro entertainers at a barroom around the corner" (13). But Williams' lines are confusing. Does the music, like the turquoise sky,

lessen the city's pervading sense of decay? Or does the music suggest a sense of decline? Williams' meaning is unclear, but his language does suggest an associative relationship between the space of the mixed race neighborhood, its music, and the charm/decay dynamic. The suggestion is that the neighborhood is a strange and uneasy space, despite Williams' outward affirmations of its "easy intermingling," in which social mixing across racial lines provoke ambiguous feelings.

The neighborhood's strangeness has perhaps the most profound effect on Blanche DuBois, whose unfamiliarity with the city allows Williams to make much of the effects of its difference. Blanche, whose first name translates as "white," enters New Orleans and finds herself confronted by a disorienting lack of boundaries. She responds to a woman who asks whether she is lost by saying, "They told me to take a street-car named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries and ride six blocks and get off at – Elysian Fields!" (15). Blanche's response indicates the city's lack of navigability for the stranger and also recalls the dynamic of charm/decay described above. Her position upon entering New Orleans is confusing since she can progress through sites whose names denote pleasure, death, and the resting place of the heroic – in itself a mixing of both elements – without much interruption. She demands of her sister Stella Kowalski, "Explain this place to me!" (19), but Stella defers and instead re-asserts the notion of the city's strangeness by responding, "New Orleans isn't like other places" (20).

Blanche's insistence that Stella explain her choice to live "in a place like this" (19) is aimed to uncover Stella's reasons for renting in a racially mixed, lower class neighborhood. Blanche's distaste at Stella's choice reveals her sense of racial separatism

and an interest in the purity of her own white racial identity, attitudes which she expects Stella to share. Stella, born like Blanche into an upper class Southern family, and now living in the neighborhood that Williams describes as having a "raffish charm," largely resists Blanche's insistence on maintaining racial hierarchies.

Blanche's aversion to her sister's residence is heightened when she discovers that her sister is pregnant. Brewer theorizes that Blanche's disappointment over Stella's pregnancy may not be rooted in jealousy so much as in "a desire to preserve an undiluted category of Whiteness and the Du Bois' position within it" (75). The loss of Belle Reve, Brewer argues, is the loss of one of the fundamental markers of "White heritage" – the loss of property. Stella's expected child by Stanley "gravely threatens the sisters' racial status, and, indeed, within dominant U.S. racial discourse such unions threaten the future of the White race" (75). Brewer points to Williams' notations for scene four as an indicator of Stella's disavowal of whiteness. Lying in bed, ostensibly in a post-coital moment, Stella's "eyes and lips have that almost narcoticized tranquility that is the faces of Eastern idols" (Williams 62).

Blanche's racial separatism and elitism are also apparent in her degradations of her brother-in-law Stanley, whose Polish heritage is a source of amusement for her. She mocks him as "not so – highbrow" as the Irish (23), a comparison that calls attention to the not-quite-white status of both groups in postwar America. By belittling him, Blanche insinuates her own sense of superiority as determined by her own race and class positions. In pleading with Stella not to continue in her relationship with Stanley, Blanche deepens her mockery of Stanley by appealing to his "sub-human" characteristics,

comparing him to an ape in an extended metaphor that emphasizes his baseness by arguing for his lack of humanity. The word "jungle" also appears in Blanche's tirade, a reference to the distinctly other space that Stanley traffics in, in his lack of civilized values: "there he is – Stanley Kowalski – survivor of the stone age! Bearing the raw meat home from the kill in the jungle!" (72). In opposition to Stanley's primitiveness, Blanche casts herself and Stella as representatives of an evolved white upper class for whom "such things as art – as poetry and music" are markers of a more civilized status. Blanche stakes her claim on these qualities as evidence of her own and Stella's innate superiority, arguing that they have to "hold as our flag" these values. The latter metaphor tends to conflate Blanche's sense of racial purity and hierarchical separatism with a sense of civilized nationalism that can by symbolized by a flag. She worries that her purity, separatism, and sense of civility are deeply threatened by "this dark march toward whatever it is we're approaching" (72). Although Blanche will not define this vague sense of "whatever," its evocative darkness, coupled with her lament that Stella has married a sub-human, not-quite-white man, suggests that Blanche fears the devaluation of white racial purity and hierarchy that will attend mixed-race, mixed-class reproductive unions like the one between Stella and Stanley.

Blanche's investment in whiteness allows her a standpoint from which to question the difference of New Orleans, and her position allows Williams to assert New Orleans' difference as a space that perhaps critically challenges the white, upper-class social norms that Blanche represents. But her eventual madness suggests multiple readings. The emotional disorientation that New Orleans' difference elicits among those who

accept racial separatism is written as threatening; Blanche doesn't leave New Orleans intact. On one hand, her destruction could be read positively: New Orleans destroys Blanche's racist superiority, her entire system of classification and codification. In this reading, Williams' construction of Blanche's madness could be read as a critique of a rigid white elitism. Brewer reads Blanche in this fashion, as a representation of "the corrupted reason behind the racial politics of the 1940s" which "gave rise [. . .] to the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, which menaced Catholics, Jews, and those Whites identified as race traitors, as well as Blacks" (76). If Blanche's insistence on white racial purity, which is the germinating idea behind the racial politics that Brewer describes, is among her fatal flaws, then her failure to survive the challenge of New Orleans indicates that Williams is at some level critical of her attitude, her investment in her own whiteness. In this reading, one could argue that Williams celebrates New Orleans' difference from the racial politics of the period.

But Williams complicates this critique of racial separatism with his construction of Stanley, who represents not blackness exactly, but the not-quite-whiteness of ethnic Americans in the postwar period.[12] Stanley has not yet been admitted to the status of whiteness, an exclusion that we can assume not only on the basis of Blanche's tirades

[12] See Rachel Van Duyvenbode's "Darkness Made Visible: Miscegenation, Masquerade and the Signified Racial Other in Tennessee Williams' *Baby Doll* and *A Streetcar Named Desire,"* in which she draws on Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* to argue that Stanley is a "conduit for Williams' own veiled fantasies of the dark Africanist other" (204). See also George W. Crandell's "Misrepresentation and Miscegenation: Reading the Racialized Discourse of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire,"* in which he argues that Stanley is "ascrib[ed]... the features of the racial other" (339).

against him, but also from Stella's remarks.[13] Like Blanche, Stella also reduces Stanley to animalistic comparisons, describing him as "a different species" (24) and admitting that she nearly goes "wild" (25) when he travels without her, comparisons which George Crandell notes are part of a "racialized discourse" (339). Stella's vexation with Stanley is sustained not only through her expressions of her own lingering sense of superiority but also through her seemingly incompatible yet uncontrollable desire to be with him, in the space of racial difference that he occupies. Stanley admits Stella's passage into estranged territory, and his position as the facilitator for transgression into difference could indicate Williams' interest in crafting a sensationalistic interracial romance grounded in racial stereotypes: white superiority, white fixation with the racial other, and the deeply attractive yet deranged nature of the racial other.

These stereotypes rely on the construction of black male sexuality as formidable. According to Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, white fears of black male sexuality lead to cultural associations of black men with beasts (170). Both Stanley's cruelty and his attractiveness rely on these stereotypes. Stella is irresistibly drawn to him, returning to him even when he hits her. Her repression of his abuse of Blanche, articulated in her comment in the last act that she "couldn't believe [Blanche's] story and go on living with Stanley" (133), also testifies to Stanley's primal attractive power. According to Rachel van Duyvenbode, who critiques Williams for his usage of the racial stereotypes about black male sexuality, Stanley acts as an agent of "rape and

[13] Stanley's own vehement insistence on his whiteness also suggests that he is suspiciously marginal to that category. He claims that he is "one hundred percent American, born and raised in the greatest country on earth and proud as hell of it" (110). See Crandell, 344, and van Duyvenbode, 213.

psychological terror" (204). Stanley's cruelty, apparent in his violence to both sisters and especially in his rape of Blanche during the birth of his child, is excessive. Its depth lends credence to Blanche's and Stella's references to his savagery. Although Blanche's whiteness may very well be a focus of critique in the drama, Stanley's racialized position fares no better. Williams writes Stanley as the racialized monster who foregoes his loyalties to Stella. In raping Blanche, Stanley becomes the unhinged, devouring beast that the sisters' references to savagery predict. His consumption of Blanche – his appetite for and his destruction of her – is complete; she no longer comprehends her situation as she exits the stage. Thus Williams' construction of Stanley justifies the racial codifications and racist assumptions delivered through Stella and Blanche, leaving us with a narrative that reinscribes racial separatism and racist stereotypes as much as it critiques them.

Stella's attraction to Stanley is reflected in her attraction to New Orleans. She emphasizes the city's difference – "New Orleans isn't like other places" – as a defense against Blanche's insults to the city. Through his construction of the attitudes of both sisters, Williams creates a sense of New Orleans as a space deeply attractive yet threatening in its difference. Although Stella does not outwardly explain the reason for the city's difference, Williams indirectly implies that its challenge to whiteness is the root of this difference. He also expresses, through Stanley, a sense that this difference is seductive and compelling. Stanley's appeal not only excites Blanche's ire and fixation, but it also compels Stella to reject her race and class bias, her investment in whiteness, and even her loyalty to Blanche in order to live with him in New Orleans. The city

becomes a sort of extension of Stanley, as it too is racially "other" and, according to Williams' scene notations, deeply attractive, both charming and degenerate.

Williams' construction of the relationship between Blanche and Stanley suggests at one level a sort of fantasy about racial mixing, in which the white body is destroyed or fundamentally altered at the hands of the black body, yet something about the process of transformation remains compellingly attractive, as well as sexual. This fantasy reads the idea of racial mixing with a sense of both heightened anxiety and sensual desire; it exhibits, as George Crandell argues, "a fascination with the fearful and desirable prospect of miscegenation" (339). Crandell's description points to a further complication in Williams' construction of desire; if whiteness is written as a suspicious construction that is frequently undone, the narrative also insinuates horror at its dissolution and thus suggests that miscegenation is an act of perversion and obliteration. The fantasy is on one level obsessed with the racial purity of whiteness, despite its criticism of that category. It also invests blackness with an inherent primitivism and savagery, craving but fearing erotic contact with it, since it will result in the destruction of whiteness.

Williams' obsession with the devouring black body is, as George Crandell and Rachel Van Duyvenbode attest, is at least in part a fantasy that reads miscegenation with both fear and attraction. Williams repeatedly employs racialized discourse to connect "the erotic with the dark deviant male" (Van Duyvenbode 205). His imagery also resonates with Toni Morrison's concept of an Africanist presence, a literary fabrication used by writers who play with the imaginative possibilities of a metaphorical blackness in constructing their own identities. The Africanist presence acts as a site of difference that

affords these writers a means of meditating on what is forbidden. Morrison explains, "Just as entertainers, through or by association with blackface, could render permissible topics that otherwise would have been taboo, so American writers were able to employ an imagined Africanist persona to articulate and imaginatively act out the forbidden in American culture" (66). Morrison's work is key here in theorizing Williams' articulations of blackness. His evocative expressions of annihilative desire and his repeated use of the jungle metaphor employ "a language that mystifies what it cannot bring itself to articulate but still attempts to register" (Morrison 66). Williams' Africanist presence may well provide him, much like minstrel shows provided white actors, "an opportunity to indulge his own sublimated desire for the 'lusty life of black folk' under the protection of otherness" (Van Duyvenbode 203). But what Van Duyvenbode recognizes as Williams' "contemporary fears of cultural degeneration, censorship and deviancy" (205), expressed in his anxious rendering of an Africanist presence, regard not only miscegenation, but also encode anxieties over male homosexual desire.

To argue that Williams' Africanist presence encodes attraction and repulsion toward male homosexuality is to some degree in keeping with Morrison's own analysis of the purpose of this presence. She contends that "in matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse. Evasion has fostered another, substitute language in which the issues are encoded, foreclosing open debate" (9). Recognizing the silences, evasions and codes is key to reading the Africanist presence in Williams' work, but not only as a means toward understanding Williams' constructions of race. It is also important to recognize that Williams' "contemporary fears" may very well have

concerned his representations of homosexuality in a period in which outright dramatic representations would not have been staged. David Savran reads Williams' works against its difficult postwar backdrop, in which "the baiting and brutalization of 'Communists and queers' dominated the national agenda" (5). Responding to the restrictions of the period, Williams' "homosexuality is both ubiquitous and elusive, everywhere in his work and yet nearly impossible to pin down." It is "endlessly refracted in his work: translated, reflected, and transposed" (82-83). Savran recognizes multiple "screens and covers" that Williams uses to represent homosexuality, which appears "as a valorization of eroticism generally [...] as an endorsement of transgressive liaisons that cut across lines of social class, ethnicity, and race, and violate mid-century social prescriptions; and as a deep sympathy for the outsider and the disenfranchised, for 'the fugitive kind'" (83).

Savran's recognition of Williams' interest in "transgressive liaisons" as encoded articulations of male homosexual desires dovetails nicely with Morrison's description of the Africanist presence. If Williams' racialized discourse acts as a screen narrative that dramatizes homosexuality, then even his earliest descriptions of New Orleans as the setting for a "relatively warm and easy intermingling of races" (13) become more complicated than they appear on the surface. In the lines that follow, Williams' narration of race and location proves to be more uneasy than his early description lets on. His ambivalence recalls his description of the city as both a site of personal freedom and a site of shock, and it persists throughout the drama in Williams' racialized construction of the sexual tensions building between Blanche and Stanley, which are rendered as both

compelling and destructive. Reading their relationship as a screen for the narration of queer intimacy requires a reading of Williams' white and black imagery with an eye toward his description of New Orleans as a space that confronts the "Puritanism of [his] nature." In this reading, the tension between Blanche and Stanley, who are characterized, respectively, through white and black imagery, represents Williams' view of New Orleans as the space that facilitated his recognition of his homosexuality. Blanche represents a Puritanical propriety, rendered as deeply flawed, that is overcome by the primal shock of New Orleans' freedom, as embodied by Stanley. This is not to say that Blanche represents Williams, while Stanley represents queerness; the narrative is not so neatly constructed. But the dynamic of Blanche and Stanley's relationship echoes the internal struggle that Williams reports as having "never ceased exploiting" in his work.

If Blanche represents Puritanical propriety, her construction through images of an often racialized whiteness – her name, her aristocratic refinement, her elitism – is apt. Her delicacy suggests the fragility of propriety when confronted with the permissiveness that New Orleans' cultural life allows. As argued earlier, her system of classification and codification cannot survive New Orleans' challenge to social norms. Williams' equivocal portrayal of this failure is representative of his own ambiguities toward queer intimacies. Blanche is confronted with queerness early on in life; the discovery of her husband's homosexuality unhinges her, and this development sets up the rest of the action of the play. But Blanche's fall is not complete. Her final deterioration unfolds at the hands of Stanley, whose villainy is constructed through a discourse that imagines blackness as hypersexual, primitive, and animalistic. His ability to complete the

destruction of Blanche further posits the connection in Williams' work between racial and sexual anxieties. His devouring presence also encodes Williams' ambiguity toward New Orleans' permissiveness, here imagined through the connotative richness of an Africanist presence.

Williams' Africanist presence allows him to explore the meaning of desire, especially male homosexual desire, which he represents as alternately compelling, exploitative, sadistic and destructive. Ultimately, Williams' perspective on desire is more critical than it is positive. While taboo desires are constructed as compellingly attractive, they are also regularly given punitive treatment, as Annette Saddik observes, in much of Williams' work. Homosexual desire in particular, as we see in "Desire and the Black Masseur" and *Suddenly Last Summer,* is "punished by cannibalism [. . .] indicating a commentary on the nature of homosexual relationships in society." Saddik suggests that physical obliteration is "the retribution and atonement for the sin of transgressing the boundaries of desire established by social institutions" (348). In "Desire and the Black Masseur," this atonement is delivered at the hands of a literally devouring blackness.

Whereas the relationship between Blanche and Stanley registers Williams' anxieties toward queer intimacies indirectly, Williams' representation of these intimacies becomes much more direct in "Desire and the Black Masseur." In bringing them to the surface, Williams explicitly develops the idea that taboo intimacies warrant punishment. His more direct narration, however, does not preclude him from also coding these intimacies through alarmist racial narratives. The dynamic of fear and attraction toward the black beast that undergirds Williams' construction of Stanley becomes far more

pronounced in "Desire and the Black Masseur." Williams' use of the jungle metaphor in a critical scene in the story bears out this representation, which also links "Desire" to Williams' other New Orleans-based works in solidifying the representation of the city as a site where taboo desires are met with violence.

Although the setting of "Desire" is not specifically identified, cultural and geographical details suggest that the story is set in New Orleans. The urban setting, streetcar line, nearby lake, Catholic populace and racially segregated but proximate residential spaces can lead one to conclude, as critic Brian Peters does, that the story is indeed New Orleans-based. Identifying the setting as such would allow for the conclusion that Williams again uses New Orleans as the backdrop for a narrative that links desire with violence, but even if this conclusion is not viable, the story does offer insight into Williams' anxious construction of interracial and homosexual intimacies and their linkage to his use of the jungle metaphor, which he repeatedly associates with New Orleans in *Streetcar* and *Suddenly Last Summer*.

Whereas *Streetcar* establishes the connection between violence and desire, "Desire and the Black Masseur" more fully articulates the terms of this relationship. In *Streetcar,* Williams indicates that desire leads toward a devouring blackness, which, as embodied by Stanley, corrupts Stella and destroys Blanche. In "Desire and the Black Masseur," desire is treated more directly; Brian Peters contends that it "specifically refers to Anthony Burns' craving for abusive intimacy" (115). Williams' narrator in the story defines desire more explicitly, however, as "something that is made to occupy a larger space than that which is afforded by the individual being," and he likens desire to

"incompletions." Like a "wall that has been omitted from a house because the stones were exhausted," a man like Burns "feels a part of himself to be like a missing wall or a room left unfurnished and he tries as well as he can to make up for it." According to the narrator, people compensate "for that which is not yet formed in human nature" by a sort of subterfuge, covering up incompletions through imagination or art, through violence, or through "atonement, the surrender of self to violent treatment by others with the idea of thereby clearing one's self of his guilt" (206). Williams' descriptions suggest that desire indicates a fundamental lack in human nature that has a lessening effect; if desire is akin to a missing wall or must be compensated for, it speaks to an absence that subtracts from the value or integrity of the person. This critical view of desire is related to Williams' idea that desire must be atoned for. He gives two options for atonement, imagination/art and physical violence; the former suggests a motivating force behind his own writing, while the latter controls the thrust of "Desire" as well as his other New Orleans-based works.

Williams' choice of the word "atonement" is significant in that it associates desire with crime or sin. The resonance of the term aligns with his assessment that desire provokes a sense of guilt that must be cleared, though Williams doesn't allow for clearance through reconciliation so much as through fatal destruction. The outcomes of desire indicate that Williams does not see atonement as a viable possibility; desire cannot be compensated for, perhaps because it is too vast. Abuse becomes a partial penance for desire, but the cost of desire can only be fully paid by annihilation.

Williams' specific construction of the outcome of desire is troubling, since desire ends, as it also does in *Suddenly Last Summer,* in consumption. If consumption refers to the complete using up of something to the point of its destruction, which here involves the way that desire uses up or completely engulfs Burns, it also manifests quite literally as oral consumption. Critics have commonly noted the prevalence of oral imagery in the story, which bookends "Desire" and grows progressively more threatening: the story begins with a description of Burns as "from his very beginning" having "betrayed an instinct for being included in things that swallowed him up" (205). Burns' oral fetish finds its logical, if excessive, conclusion in the story's ending, in which the masseur devours Burns' body, eating his "splintered bones clean" (211). The excessiveness of this outcome implies Williams' critical attitude toward homosexuality. Constructed as the end realization of a progressively desirous oral fetish, cannibalism indicates Williams' punitive, or at least exoticized, treatment of same-sex desires. It also encodes sexual intimacy, which Peters argues "is reduced (or magnified) to its most excessive physical components" in Williams' substitution of cannibalism for intimacy (116). Despite this overwhelmingly negative view of desire, however, which seems driven by the guilt to which he refers in his definition of atonement, Williams does remain somewhat ambiguous in evaluating desire. Burns' relationship with the masseur involves positive aspects; the abuse is mutually enjoyed, and even craved by Burns.

In incorporating cannibalism into his works, Williams narrates his equivocal views toward same-sex intimacies through a racialized discourse that also includes his use of the jungle metaphor at a crucial point in the story to signify the conflation of desire

with violence. The metaphor appears at the moment when the masseur's violence climaxes at a point of excess. Before this point, the mutually satisfying relationship between Burns and the masseur has been building in physical intensity. The masseur has been hitting Burns progressively harder, an action that sexually satisfies Burns: "as the violence and the pain increased, the little man grew more and more fiercely hot with his first true satisfaction, until all at once a knot came loose in his loins and released a warm flow" (209). Having already broken two of Burns' ribs in an earlier session, the masseur finally breaks one of Burns' leg bones. Burns cannot help but cry out, at which point the manager of the bathhouse appears. He sees Burns vomiting from the pain, notices Burns' many bruises, and demands of the masseur, "What do you think this is? A jungle?" (210).

Though the manager compares the scene he discovers to a "jungle," Williams does not explain his reference. The reader doesn't know exactly what it is about the sadistic scene that evokes the idea of a jungle, but we do know that the manager intends the term as harshly critical. If we consider the scene from the manager's perspective, the term seems to conjure up for him associations of sexual perversion, consumption, and violence – in short, associations that align with Williams' definition of desire, here played out, from the manager's perspective, in a deeply disordered scene in which the strong black body aggressively overtakes the weak white body. The manager's assessment of the scene echoes the narrator's earlier description of the masseur's sadistic pleasure: "He loved to have their white skin prone beneath him, to bring his fist or the palm of his hand down hard on its passive surface." The masseur's desire, the narrator suggests, is motivated at least in part by hatred of "white-skinned bodies because they

abused his pride" (209). Because it is a motive for the scene that eventually prompts the "jungle" comparison, the masseur's vengeful race loathing, which is tangled up with his sensual enjoyment of that torture, becomes another element of the latent ideas suggested by the term "jungle." Ultimately, the jungle becomes, in this construction, a shorthand reference to a place in which aberrant desires are fulfilled. These desires include abusive same-sex and interracial intimacies, the latter of which also incorporates a vengeful black loathing that devours weak whiteness in a sensualized act of consumption. For the manager, the fulfillment of these desires can only be read negatively, thus casting the jungle metaphor as a critique. Yet the arrangement of consumption is mutually agreeable for both Burns and the masseur, and their pleasure implies that Williams' stance on the descriptor "jungle" may be far less critical than the manager's, though the term remains descriptive of a place for the fulfillment of deviant desires.

But is Williams' own stance on the deviance of relationships in the jungle critical or celebratory? Although he emphasizes the abusive quality of the relationship between the masseur and Burns, he delights in its strange brutality, inviting the reader toward a voyeuristic view of forbidden pleasure. The recent body of criticism on Williams' work has remained divided in determining whether his articulation of same-sex relationships is celebratory or critical, and "Desire" confuses the matter by integrating both elements as well.[14] While the violence enjoyed by Burns and the masseur marks their intimacy as deranged, their relationship can also be read positively, since it is mutually agreeable:

[14] See David Savran, *Cowboys, Communists and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams*; John Clum, "'Something Cloudy, Something Clear': Homophobic Discourse in Tennessee Williams"; Robert J. Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity* and John S. Bak, "'May I Have a Drag...?': Mae West, Tennessee Williams, and the Politics of a Gay Identity."

"The giant loved Burns, and Burns adored the giant" (Williams 209). The latter line recalls David Savran's assessment of Williams' work as "celebrating various subjugated masculinities" (81), here being two men involved in a sadomasochistic relationship.

The only place where Burns' and the masseur's desires can be consummated is "a room in the town's Negro section" (210). This mapping of the "jungle," the space which permits aberrant desires, onto a black sector of town is suspect, although critics like Brian Peters argue that the spatial move of the text acts much like Williams' homosexual/homophobic dynamic does. Peters contends that "the racial implications of the text remain indeterminate; Williams may be tapping racist stereotype by aligning black society with licentiousness, or critiquing white society for its lack of Christian forgiveness" (119). But even if the overtaking of white bodies by black bodies is written as mutually pleasurable for both parties, and even if white society is critiqued, the story still associates blackness with destruction through cannibalism, a depiction that is indeed troublesome in light of racist stereotypes, yet this association is integral to Williams' construction of the jungle. His construction of this space is similar in his drama *Suddenly Last Summer*, which echoes "Desire and the Black Masseur" in depicting blackness as a cannabalistic presence.

Suddenly Last Summer opens with the fantastic scene notations described earlier in this essay. If these notations implicitly configure jungle imagery as central to the drama, Williams also brings this imagery to the forefront of the drama via direct dialogue. The doctor describes Sebastian's garden, a key location and the site of the opening scene notations, as "a well-groomed jungle" (11), marking the space as

contradictory. It is at once civilized and overwhelmingly chaotic, a mixture that leads one to question whether the garden is the site of a wildness only masked by a well-controlled veneer or a place in which wildness and civilization compete, the jungle threatening to overtake the civilized space at any moment. Considering that Sebastian himself is described in later remembrances by other characters as impeccably groomed, yet the victim of cannibalistic consumption and the initiator of arguably predatory acts himself, the garden works as an extension of the character, just as New Orleans is an extension of Stanley in *Streetcar*. In both instances, Williams configures a sense of place that mimics the violence/desire dynamic he constructs around his characters. But *Suddenly Last Summer* assumes a far darker dynamic, in which taboo intimacies are more severely punished, leaving no room for the sustainment of mutually beneficial relationships.

In fact, the theme of exploitation runs through the play, and the jungle imagery of Sebastian's garden provides a backdrop for the story line that centers around cruel exploiters. Sebastian Venable exploits both his mother and his cousin Catharine, who are more outgoing than he, and whose social grace he can use to procure a series of love interests for himself. He is exploited by cannibalistic young boys from whom he has solicited sexual favors in Cabeza de Lobo. Mrs. Venable exploits the doctor, whom she tries to buy with the promise of research funding if he will perform a lobotomy on her niece. Catharine is exploited by nearly everyone in the play – her cousin Sebastian, Mrs. Venable, and her mother and brother; the latter plead with her to change her story of Sebastian's death so that they can collect their inheritance from him. The theme of exploitation and opportunism controls the drama and provides the tension between the

characters, all of whom but Catharine, according to Michael Paller, share an "appetite for others" (149). Paller even identifies the drama as "a meditation on the ways people use each other and call it love" (95).

If Sebastian's jungle-garden is the primary initial backdrop for the unfolding of this story of exploitation, then Williams' construction of the site as a place for the revelation and fulfillment of not just deviant but also exploitative desires is a decidedly more critical depiction of the jungle than what we find in *Streetcar* or "Desire and the Black Masseur." In *Suddenly Last Summer*, the jungle becomes more than a permissive site for the playing out of narratives of excess and desire that might be read with some ambiguity. Instead, it is assessed more clearly as a negative space, largely because the desires that structure the drama are written as deeply deranged, self-serving and destructive. Mutually agreeable relationships cannot be sustained in this space. Instead, they collapse to a point at which exploitative violence is the only means of connection. The attainment of intimacy through violence is also a theme in *Streetcar* and "Desire," but the theme is more ominously executed in *Suddenly Last Summer*, since pleasure and violence cannot be reconciled as simultaneously coexisting. Williams does not temper his depictions of violence with scenes of romance as he does in *Streetcar,* nor is the brutality of desire mutually agreeable to multiple parties, as in "Desire and the Black Masseur." Instead, Williams depicts taboo intimacies through darker articulations of death and destruction that allow little room for the possibility of a positive reading.

As in his earlier works, Williams represents homosexuality through heavily racialized images of an exploitative whiteness and a devouring blackness. In the play,

whiteness is critically represented on multiple levels. It can signal queerness and can also assume an overwhelming, impenetrable and ominous presence. Catharine's description of Sebastian in the moments before he is killed incorporates images of whiteness that become strange in their excessiveness. Sebastian is described as being "white as the weather. He had on a spotless white silk Shantung suit and a white silk tie and a white panama and white shoes, white – white lizard skin – pumps! He […] kept touching his face and his throat with a white silk handkerchief and popping little white pills in his mouth" (82-83). The associations with white imagery here signal a sense of aristocratic refinement, as shown through Williams' references to Sebastian's seemingly impeccable dress. But perhaps more importantly, Sebastian's spotless white suit and silk goods, as well as his anxious pill-popping and face-dabbing, suggest that there is something anxious, bizarre, exaggerated and even subterranean about Sebastian that we might read as code for his queerness.

But these images of whiteness not only characterize Sebastian; Catharine also repeatedly describes the heat and streets of the town as white. The white imagery increases as the drama moves toward his death, eventually becoming overwhelming as it dominates the scene. Catharine describes Sebastian's final moments in Cabeza de Lobo by saying, "It was all white outside. […] As if a huge white bone had caught on fire in the sky and blazed so bright it was white and turned the sky and everything under the sky white with it" (89). More foreboding than actually destructive, the white imagery is blinding and suggests an extreme heat. As the intensity of the imagery builds, the scene becomes whitened-out, so to speak. The overwhelming presence of whiteness erases any

sense of difference, introducing confusion and an aura of impenetrability; it doesn't allow any one thing to be distinguished from another, creating a sense of emptiness about the scene. Significantly, this imagery intensifies just before Catharine narrates the punitive and most horrific moment of the text, suggesting that the images signal a pallor of sickness about Sebastian before he dies. The sense of emptiness, strangeness and excess points to Sebastian's moral vacancy, which may be associated with his queerness or his exploitative activities, which are not mutually exclusive in the drama.

Williams' white imagery starkly contrasts the imagery he uses to describe the children who devour Sebastian, represented via images of blackness and animalism. They are described as "frightfully thin and dark naked children that looked like a flock of plucked birds." They rove as a gang, or flock, depicted en masse with no individuality, and they are noisy, begging for bread and making "gobbling noises with their little black mouths, stuffing their little black fists to their mouths..." (84). Catharine's description of them as a flock and as "gobbling" dehumanizes the children, just as Blanche's references to apes dehumanize Stanley, and it also hearkens back to an earlier scene in which Mrs. Venable recalls a trip to the Galapagos Islands with Sebastian. During their trip, they watched a flock of carnivorous birds circling around a beach on which newly hatched sea-turtles were making their way toward the ocean. Mrs. Venable recalls the memory with horror: "the flesh-eating birds that made the sky almost as black as the beach!" (16). Her description of the savage scene sets the stage for the manner of Sebastian's death and offers obvious comparisons to the bird-like young men who cannibalize him. In sum total, these remembrances suggestively associate the devouring forces of the drama with

a blackness that is cannibalistic, perverse, inhuman and overwhelming in its manifestation as massive flocks and roving gangs.

Williams' images of both whiteness and blackness are employed at critical moments of carnivorous activity in the text. They both connote a sense of overwhelming horror, but whereas blackness signifies the more active force, destructive and consuming, whiteness is imagined as more anxious, mute and empty. This dynamic mirrors Williams' use of imagery when he introduces the massage parlor in "Desire and the Black Masseur." He describes the patrons of the parlor as being "swatched in billowing tent-like sheets of white fabric. They trailed barefooted along the moist white tiles, as white and noiseless as ghosts except for their breathing, and their faces all wore a nearly vacant expression. They drifted as if they had no thoughts to conduct them." They stand in contrast to the black masseurs who "seemed very dark and positive against the loose white hangings of the baths. […] they moved about with force and resolution. They alone seemed to have an authority here. […] they swept the white hangings aside with great black palms that you felt might just as easily have seized bolts of lightning and thrown them back at the clouds" (207).

The parallels between the constructions of racialized imagery in these works also extends to *Streetcar*. Sebastian's whiteness, constructed through references to his refinement, careful dress and anxiety, for example, recalls Blanche's characterization in *Streetcar*. In each of these works, figures described by white imagery fall prey to devouring black bodies: Blanche to Stanley, Burns to the masseur, and Sebastian to the young boys. The setting of the plays in New Orleans is crucial to reading these parallels;

in each instance, Williams returns to the theme of the city's shocking permissiveness confronting his Puritan nature, as described through an already established racialized discourse.

This discourse allows Williams to sort out unresolved tensions toward his own homosexuality under the cover of a familiar, racialized narrative that constructs his "Puritan nature" through images of whiteness and the force of desire through images of blackness. This is not to say that a straight/queer dynamic can be neatly mapped onto Williams' racialized imagery; the imagery is not so reductive. Nor can the images be read as wholly critical or wholly celebratory, since Williams' critical approach toward the relationship between whiteness and blackness shifts over the course of his work. Whereas whiteness is depicted through Blanche in *Streetcar* as elitist and separatist, it does not assume these characteristics in "Desire and the Black Masseur," in which Williams takes a relatively less critical attitude in describing it as passive, vacant and incomplete. *Suddenly Last Summer,* however, picks up strains of both representations in its descriptions of Sebastian and the setting at Cabeza de Lobo. The latter also folds in the notion that whiteness is base and exploitative. Williams' view toward the destruction of whiteness shifts over the course of his works as well. The force of destruction becomes increasingly violent and more complete, articulated through rape and then later through cannibalism. Even the progression from "Desire and the Black Masseur" to *Suddenly Last Summer* becomes darker, as Williams' fraught view that atonement is necessary but nearly impossible gives way to a view that affords even less chance of reconciliation to the character embodying whiteness. Sebastian's death is more terrifying

than Burns', indicating Williams' more punitive treatment of desire. His more exploitative nature even suggests that in some sense his outcome is warranted.

The differences between these narratives prevent a reading of Williams' attitude toward homosexuality as wholly celebratory or critical. Both attitudes play into his construction of desire, and thus both describe his attitude toward New Orleans, as a space that facilitates homosexual and interracial intimacies. Perhaps this lack of resolution accounts for the sticking power of Williams' imagination of that space as a compelling yet destructive zone where strange excesses and forbidden pleasures are permitted, but at a dear cost. In fact, the popularity of his exotic representation of the city, especially among locals, can be witnessed in the city's annual Tennessee Williams/ New Orleans Literary Festival, which celebrated its 23rd year in 2009. It is telling that New Orleanians have opted to name a premier literary event after an author who did much to tout the notion of the city's exoticism.

Yet it is also troubling that Williams' popularity in New Orleans rests on works that encode troubling ideas about race and homosexuality into literature. Williams reinscribes persistent and damaging stereotypes in suggesting that contact with the attractive, erotic forces of blackness and homosexuality erupts in destruction via rape or cannibalism. His assumptions about both blackness and whiteness are reductive and divisive, despite the fact that his criticism of white separatism and elitism can be read positively. Williams also plays on stereotypes of black male sexuality as overwhelming and bestial; in fact, this stereotype is often the basis for the animalistic comparisons that frequently appear in his work and extend to his construction of not-quite-white ethnic

others like Stanley Kowalski. Williams also writes mixed-race relationships as literally a dead end in both "Desire and the Black Masseur" and *Suddenly Last Summer.* Although the case might be made that Stella's baby survives in *Streetcar*, we also know that the baby is doomed to be raised by a father who raped its aunt during its birth – hardly a measure of successful union. These are the often unrecognized issues that bubble beneath the surface of Williams' imaginative constructions of desire. His jungle metaphor, with its connotative richness, keeps these issues in play.

Chapter Three: Haunting the Jungle

New Orleans is frequently represented in literature as a place of striking exoticism. Lush environs, romantic charm and accents of a seductive degeneracy contour the imagined landscape. If the attractiveness of this idea of New Orleans is demonstrated through the persistence of exotic narratives, we find a seminal rendering of this narrative generated in 1880 with the publication of George Washington Cable's novel *The Grandissimes.* Cable's novel not only constructs an early and significant image of exotic New Orleans, but it does so while simultaneously arguing to assimilate the city into the national fabric. In doing so, he must not only conjure a sense of the city's strangeness, but also relegate this exoticism to a space in which it will no longer threaten New Orleans' national aspirations. By the novel's end, he has removed each of his major Afro-Creole characters to spaces of death, exile and the historical past – removals that speak to his assumption that these characters threaten the city's chance of assimilation into the nation. Writers who struggle with the legacy of his representation must wrestle with the tendency of his work to conflate whiteness with national identity, as well as with his omissions that misrepresent New Orleans' Afro-Creole culture as a relic of a foreign past.

One should not underestimate the influence or persistence of Cable's novel on the way that New Orleans is imagined both in literature and in broader cultural discourse. Although Cable's work was preceded by earlier representations of exotic New Orleans that also conflated the city's strangeness with its practices of racial hybridity, Cable

solidified this association into a set of narrative codes that continue to resonate in contemporary works. His legacy, especially when understood in conjunction with the influence of other literary stalwarts like William Faulkner and Tennessee Williams, is found in numerous successive texts that, despite his aims otherwise, read New Orleans as a city only peripherally American in identity and capable of effecting strange magic that both delights and destroys white strangers. Although the implications of the exotic narrative are often overlooked, they are troublesome in their reliance on a racialized discourse that frequently articulates New Orleans' strangeness through an imagined blackness.

Contemporary poets Brenda Marie Osbey and Joy Harjo incorporate ghostly figures from New Orleans' colonial past in a way that challenges the legacy of writers like Cable. Their ghosts are unusual in that they work to some degree within the standard framework of the narrative of exotic New Orleans; certainly, ghosts do add an exotic strain of charm or degeneracy to a text. But more importantly, these ghosts disrupt the exotic narrative's damaging effects. If they contribute added mystery to the strangeness of New Orleans, their more influential work is the recovery of the standard narrative's erasures.

Brenda Marie Osbey is a native New Orleanian who served as Louisiana's poet laureate from 2005 to 2007. The Afro-Creole characters that haunt the poems in her collection *All Saints* respond to the legacy of writers like Cable when they speak as disembodied heads and ghostly presences. Their fractured bodies and uncanny appearances make sense when we contextualize them among a history of narratives that

have removed, dismissed or made strange the literary embodiments of racial hybridity in New Orleans. Osbey's ghosts reckon with a narrative that is founded on erasures by taking us back to the source of excision and surprising us, commanding our attention at the site of trauma. If the ghosts seem frightening in their current state, they also convey immediacy to a troubling and understudied history of representation. Their broken bodies point to a history of representational violence, as enacted through excisions and misrepresentations. Their appearances suggest that the standard narrative of exotic New Orleans still remains troubling, a haunted and unsteady cover whose omissions require disinterment.

A member of the Muscogee Creek nation and author of several collections of poetry that emphasize themes of community and survival, Joy Harjo focuses on the city in her poem "New Orleans." Like Osbey's work, the poem confronts troubling erasures, but Harjo doesn't bring the subjects of colonial domination to speak in her work as Osbey does. Harjo does, however, articulate a way of understanding place that goes unrecognized in standard narratives of New Orleans. Her New Orleans is sensuous and animate; the place itself has memories of a pre-colonial past that persist into contemporary daily life. Harjo also spies the ghost of Hernando de Soto in her poem. His appearance signals, like Osbey's ghosts, the poet's need to reckon with a legacy of erasure that is linked to a colonial past. De Soto's ghost allows Harjo to crack open the sense of closure that history assumes; in other words, it allows her to reimagine de Soto outside the terms of standard historical narratives and recast him in terms more

meaningful for her, more relevant to the present, and more sustainable for postcolonial Native American communities.

Osbey's and Harjo's ghosts resonate with a recent increase in ghostly appearances in fiction, film, and critical studies. Jeffrey Weinstock identifies this movement as part of a larger critical interest in questioning the coherence and authority of official narratives. Weinstock contends that ghosts are particularly useful for projects that seek to dismantle official narratives because they interrupt "the linearity of historical chronology" (5), making room for the emergence of alternative perspectives that question the way that history has been told. Ghosts by nature indicate a suspicion of the way that histories have been constructed; they reflect "an awareness of the narrativity of history" (5) and open a space for revisions and retellings. In ethnic American literatures, especially as these literatures reconcile with legacies of domination, exclusion and removal, ghosts allow for a rethinking of history "from alternate, competing perspectives" that question the assertions and recover the erasures that have shaped official narratives.

To identify Osbey's or Harjo's poems as ghost stories may seem somewhat to overreach, in part because these poems exist beyond the generic conventions of ghost narratives; poems are not necessarily fictions. However, poetry might very well be a fitting genre for a story that arrests history, if we consider that their structure can afford them the ability to challenge narrative coherence. Still, a larger doubt over the identification of these poems as "ghost stories" might arise from the complaint that Osbey is speaking through the mouthpieces of historical figures, although the ghost of de Soto makes a more conventional haunting appearance in Harjo's work. Why then, should

we call Osbey's figures *ghosts*? If identifying these figures as ghosts seems to imply a reification process that obscures rather than clarifies the work of the poems, I argue that the critical perspective that emerges out of studies like Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters* provides a method for understanding the type of work that ghosts do in dismantling official narratives. Gordon's and other theorists' scholarship on ghosts in literature offers a critical lens through which to read the relationship between the appearances of these historical figures and the standard narrative of exotic New Orleans that they counter.

Gordon turns to a theory of haunting to ameliorate the failure of "available critical vocabularies […] to communicate the depth, density, and intricacies of the dialectic of subjection and subjectivity […] of domination and freedom, of critique and utopian longing" (8). She identifies the site of a haunting as a "dense site," a point at which "history and subjectivity make social life" (8). Gordon's description of ghosts as "sites" is apt. For her, hauntings signal the complex intersection of various forces. In a haunting, for example, subjugated people may express resistance against dominant narratives that misrepresent them, and thus offer crucial revisions. Or formerly unexpressed experiences may find partial articulation as remembrances of the past brush up against the present. None of these actions is mutually exclusive; the site of a haunting, as Gordon notes, is "dense." She reads hauntings as sites where unresolved tensions of historical subjugation are grappled with, where legacies of domination meet resistance. As such, to understand a haunting as fully as possible, Gordon contends that understanding its historical and social contexts is key; we must also recognize that "history […] is anything but dead and over" (13).

Gordon argues that hauntings reflect the fact that effects of past events persist well into the present; ghosts work to reconcile with troubling histories and their legacies. For her, the appearance of a ghost deserves a compassionate, engaged response that attends carefully to the often convoluted, difficult-to-decipher stories behind its manifestation. She recognizes in ghosts the "pathos of their loss," as well as "the violence of the force that made them" (22). She contends that ghosts point to the openness of the wounds of "modernity's violence" (25). Gordon suggests here that ghosts are the products of violent histories of domination and misrepresentation that still haunt survivors. She argues that ghosts can do the work of compensating for these histories. Their stories "not only repair representational mistakes, but also strive to understand the conditions under which a memory was produced in the first place, toward a countermemory, for the future" (22). In a sense, hauntings can heal; Gordon's insistence on compassion toward ghosts recognizes this important work.

In responding to a ghost, Gordon suggests that we should be aware of the complexity of the act of haunting. Ghosts are hardly explicit, direct, or straightforward in their appearances. The stories they suggest are manifold and symptomatic. The ghost, Gordon explains, "is often a case of inarticulate experiences, of symptoms and screen memories, of spiraling affects, of more than one story at a time, of the traffic in domains of experience that are anything but transparent and referential. It is a case of modernity's violence and wounds, and a case of the haunting reminder of the complex social relations in which we live" (25). Kathleen Brogan offers a similar commentary in *Cultural Haunting*; she suggests that the "stories in haunted literature…tend to be tacit, multiple,

conflicting, or unfinished; meaning and identity are not static, established securely and transparently" (18). Applying this critical lens to the poems of Osbey and Harjo, we recognize that if the messages of their ghostly figures lack a sense of coherence, it is the primary work of the ghosts to disrupt. In doing so, the ghosts represent a process of negotiating with official narratives, of revising and questioning memories, and of repositioning the identity of historical figures. These figures also reestablish the often unacknowledged connection of the past to the present, and if they affect us "sometimes against our will and always a bit magically," they also compel our reassessment of history and memory "not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition" (Gordon 8). If the appearance of a ghost is arresting, in other words, it has done its job, assuming an immediacy in its delivery that makes its messages both compelling and, if not transparent, at least instantly visible.

Gordon's critical framework invites us to read Osbey's and Harjo's ghosts as representations that transmit living memories and arrest unsustainable narratives. "Living memories" in this sense refers to the repositories of cultural and personal memory that confront a legacy of historical erasure. Osbey and Harjo articulate these memories through ghosts, which also function as what Pierre Nora identifies as *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory. These sites emerge when "individual or group memory selects certain landmarks of the past – places, artworks, dates; persons, public or private, well known or obscure, real or imagined – and invests them with symbolic and political significance" (O'Meally and Fabre 7). In Osbey's and Harjo's poems, these sites are actual figures who are either implicated in histories of colonial violence, suffering under

the weight of these histories, or somehow positioned between these possibilities. To remember these figures outside of the roles ascribed to them in official narratives is to disrupt the narratives' power to structure and organize experience. The alternate form of memorialization that the ghost story engenders is what allows these representations to be both subversive and helpful. Reimagined and infused with "political significance," the ghosts thicken historical discourse by opening it up at crucial moments for the interjection of alternate renderings and alternate biographies.

In Nora's framework, *lieux de mémoire* have surfaced only in recent times, as the constructedness of historical narratives has become apparent, and as historical objectivity and totality have become suspect. Simultaneously, memory, which Nora celebrates as social, mythic and spontaneous, dynamic and evolving, has been suppressed, "surviving only as a reconstituted object beneath the gaze of critical history" (288). From these two trends arises our interest in "spectacular symbols" – "symbolic objects [...] museums, commemorations," monuments – that "are fundamentally remains, the ultimate embodiment of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived" (289). Nora's emphasis on unlikely survival is key to reading the figures that haunt Osbey's and Harjo's poems. Their ghosts offer a re-telling of history that opposes the dominant narrative of exotic New Orleans. It isn't simply the figures, but also a way of reading them, that has been excised from earlier texts. In Osbey's and Harjo's poems, the figures and the consciousness they represent manifest deliberately from a need to impede the march of history, revealing "the truth of *lieux de mémoire* – that without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep them away" (289). If the figures appear with robust

voices, as they often do in Osbey's work, the message that they voice is actually quite fragile, subject to being overwritten as marginal, threatening or otherwise non-essential to the dominant story of exotic New Orleans, which exoticizes Afro-Creole and Native American cultures rather than allowing them a sustainable space.

In understanding that Osbey's and Harjo's ghosts give voice to formerly excised narratives, we recognize that these ghosts are innately tied to social and historical contexts whose legacy of effects persists into the present and compels the haunting. We also recognize that if the ghosts provide the possibility of asserting counter-memories or questioning historical coherence, then they represent a move toward narratives of greater sustainability for the communities affected by the haunting. We also learn to respond to these ghosts with compassion and engagement, looking at them not as elements of an exotic strangeness, but seeing instead the complex network of messages and contexts that the haunting represents.

Brenda Marie Osbey

Brenda Marie Osbey's 1997 collection *All Saints* opens with a section of poems delivered by anonymous, perhaps autobiographical, first-person narrators who express private, personal grief over the passing of specific relatives and relationships. Osbey prefaces this section with the phrase, "live among your dead,/ whom you have every right/ to love." The dead here, specifically "your" dead, refer not only to those for whom the narrators mourn, but also to the dead of the reader. In using the second person here, Osbey invites her readers into the text and instructs them to remember and cherish their

own dead as they read. In doing so, she compassionately defends the rights of mourners – both her narrators and her readers – and her invitation suggests from the outset that the text is both dynamic and community-focused. It calls the reader actively to participate with the text by remembering and by loving, and it involves a wide community that includes textual subjects, the reading audience and their remembered dead.

While Osbey's first section focuses on the relationships of individuals to their dead, her second and third sections also inherit this focus but incorporate an explicit interest in New Orleans as well. The title of her second section, "in the faubourg," uses the French term for New Orleans' neighborhoods or suburbs, here referring to the historic districts just beyond the French Quarter. In this imagined location, Osbey begins to explore a wider series of subjects and to incorporate historical figures, though many of the poems are still generated in a personal, possibly autobiographical narrative voice. In section three, however, the poems undergo a major shift as Osbey begins to employ historical figures as first-person narrators. This section is titled "ex votos," a reference, Osbey tells us in her glossary, to "a votive offering… left in a shrine or other holy place as a symbol of devotion or thanksgiving" (124). In other words, the poems in this section are offerings, and accordingly, all but one of the poems is titled in reference to a specific figure that is either a holy figure or a person from New Orleans' colonial past. In incorporating additional speakers, the poems suggest a chorus of voices speaking with, to and against each other. The transition from individual, possibly autobiographical, authorship in the early sections toward what we might describe as shared authorship is a

development that resists a single narrative authority and thus resonates with Osbey's community-minded focus.

The title of the collection, *All Saints,* suggests, like the title of the third section, that Osbey's poems in sum do a sort of service work; they are redemptive. They minister by esteeming those who have passed on, both within immediate, familial contexts as well as within larger community contexts. The poems also attend to the memories of the dead and integrate them into the world of the living. The preface to the first section of poems implies Osbey's mission by instructing her readers to follow it also: "live among your dead,/ whom you have every right/ to love" (1). The language of this preface resonates with the narrative of exotic New Orleans; in one of her poems, Osbey even confesses that she has "this peculiar fascination/ with the dead" (33). However, while the latter lines especially seem to mystify Osbey's interest in memorializing the dead, the community-minded focus of her work suggests that her work is more dynamic than exotic and more compassionate than exploitative in constructing New Orleans. Osbey's interest in the dead doesn't attract and conceal for the sake of mere fantasy. To live among and to love are sustainable actions justified by her emphasis on rights. Their presence suggests that Osbey's dead – and her readers' dead as well – must still have stories to tell, and our "right" to hear them emphasizes their legitimacy. Likewise, the title of the collection suggests that the ghostly presences are esteemed, deemed sacred. From these clues, we can gather that Osbey's collection does the work of recovering and redeeming the memories of persons who might be otherwise misremembered or forgotten, especially by history's official narratives. As Gordon tells us, "Perceiving the lost subjects of history –

the missing and lost ones and the blind fields they inhabit – makes all the difference to any project trying to find the address of the present" (195). Osbey's poems, with their chorus of voices that recover, redeem and also debate with history, reconcile the legacy of the narrative of exotic New Orleans with a more sustainable vision for the present.

Osbey's sense of sacredness recalls Pierre Nora's differentiation between history and memory, in which Nora identifies history as "an intellectual and secular production," "always prosaic," as opposed to memory, which corresponds with a sense of the sacred (286). Nora suggests that sacredness is tied to a poetic reverence that social groups hold for the collective memories passed down through time, as well as, perhaps, to actual sacred rites inherited or remembered across generations. In relation to Osbey's work, both meanings of the term are applicable. Osbey infuses *All Saints* will a pervasive sense of sacredness, as suggested by the title of the collection, which hints toward the redemption and special significance of all the book's characters, and by the title of the third section, which identifies those poems as offerings to sacred subjects. Osbey's interest in sacredness is also apparent as she welcomes the dead into the community of the living (and vice versa), and especially by an introductory piece titled "Invocation," which follows the table of contents and sets the tone for the poems that follow.

The language of the invocation is indeed prayerful, especially once it assumes a voice of supplication:

> The slave ancestors who lie beneath the swamps, inside the
>
> brick of which our
>
> homes, our streets, our churches are made;

who wrought iron into the vèvès[15] that hold together the Old

City and its attachments;

personal gods and ancestors; musicians and street dancers;

Hoodoo saints and their little Catholic cousins...

our saints continue to live among us.

May they never leave us.

May the newly sanctified find their way home to us also.

May they feel well and be pleased with these offerings.

And soon

One day

May we all be counted among them. (ix)

Osbey's invocation reveals not only that her work is infused with a sense of sacredness in terms of both cultural reverence and religiosity, but it also identifies the subjects of memorialization in the work. Specifically, the work is dedicated to a community of African American ancestors, whom Osbey identifies as saints. Her use of the latter term should not be mistaken with the Catholic definition, despite the mention of "Catholic cousins" in the poem. Instead, sainthood for Osbey is far more inclusive, as suggested by her equation of ancestors with saints and by the phrase "newly sanctified," which suggests that sainthood is an ongoing, contemporary process of recognition endemic to the community. Osbey's lines also indicate that the subjects of memorialization are

[15] Osbey provides a glossary in *All Saints* that defines vèvè as "the sign, symbol, or signature of a deity in the form of a diagram, series of ideographs, or other visual representations" (127).

linked to a history of slavery, thus revealing the specific wound of modernity to which her figures respond, and linked to New Orleans, indicating Osbey's place-based consciousness. Her invocation to this particular group acts on the multiple levels of prayer: as a remembrance, as a summoning of presence, as an expression of devotion, and as a recognition and entreaty of a higher authority. Osbey ties this community of ancestors directly to her readership, as indicated by her frequent use of "our," "us," and "we," thus demonstrating the linkage between the communities of the past and the present. Her plural pronouns also prepare the groundwork for the variable first-person speakers in successive poems, as they also tend to undermine the notion of a single narrative authority in the text.

Osbey's emphasis on sacredness and community-mindedness in *All Saints* not only suggests that we are encountering a *lieu de mémoire,* but it also recalls Gordon's suggestion that a haunting is a highly complex appearance. As we will see shortly, Osbey's figures tell layered, even contradictory stories infused with a sense of remembrance and devotion that is not always docile or supplicating.[16] If Osbey's poems enjoin her ghostly figures into the fold of the community, their journey toward

[16] In her article "Wild and Holy Women in the Poetry of Brenda Marie Osbey," Andrea Benton Rushing also documents the layered quality of Osbey's poetry, quoting from an interview with John Lowe in *The Future of Southern Letters* in which Osbey remarks, "'I love to have characters, several characters, all telling the same story from differing viewpoints, or to have individual characters who each tell the story from *several* of their own many viewpoints. So that one character will be speaking different versions or in different voices'" (qtd. in Rushing 228). Echoing the strains of my argument in her assessment of Osbey's women characters, Rushing also observes, as her title indicates, that these characters are far more subversive than the "earnest, prayerful, self-sacrificing, hardworking mothers" that Rushing tracked in her earlier studies of African American women characters in African American poetry. Just as Osbey's sense of sacredness occupies a broader spectrum than simple piety, so Rushing notes that Osbey's women characters "are often deft, rhythmic, and ironic users of similes, metaphors, understatement, hyperbole, repetition, ellipses, and pauses who display wry, robust, bawdy senses of humor" (228). In short, she writes, Osbey's poems "portray a gallery of arresting women without a single stereotypically New Orleans tragic and glamorous quadroon or octoroon concubine among them" (242).

sanctification is not an easy process, but involves occasionally harsh critique before the hand of forgiveness is offered. Sacredness in these poems is not divorced either from the chronicling of violence; the spectrum of emotions recorded and approaches offered in the poems is broad. In fact, in reckoning with the erasures of Afro-Creole characters and recalling them into the community, Osbey foregoes the easy route of memorializing only heroic characters. The figures she chooses to enjoin into the community via remembrance are themselves often conflicted and troublesome, threatening to community stability, yet Osbey includes their representations fully, cataloging a complex network of stories and figures under the headline *All Saints*.

But Osbey's sense of sacredness is not only complex in terms of its emotional range; the author herself suggests a metaphor for understanding the various religious valences that her approach assumes. In an interview with John Lowe in *The Southern Review*, Osbey identifies the creolized religious traditions of New Orleans in which she is interested. She explains that while "Catholicism is pervasive" in New Orleans, "hoodoo is even more pervasive," and she remarks that in *All Saints* she "wanted to focus specifically on religion, especially on hoodoo and Catholicism combined."[17] As a result, her focus in the text is less dogmatic than it is syncretic, referencing figures and terms from Catholic, hoodoo, African and Caribbean religious traditions. Osbey's creolized religious approach thus adds yet another layer to the work of the poems, contouring them

[17] In *All Saints,* Osbey identifies hoodoo with New Orleans and much of southeast Louisiana. She defines it as "a religious and spiritual belief system governing and encompassing all life and life principles including, but not limited to, rituals, mysteries, healing, protection from evil, conjuring, interpretation of dreams and signs, as well as proper care of the dead and ritual veneration of the ancestors; the fundamental practices and principles of Hoodoo are West African and Caribbean in origin; it is related to but not synonymous with *Vodùn, Obeah, Macumba, Candomblé, Santería, Santidade,* and other New World African religions" (126).

with cultural referents that are highly specific to New Orleans, yet rarely approached as anything other than spectacle in its dominant narratives.[18]

Despite the fact that many of the poems in *All Saints* are located in New Orleans or express a significant relationship with the city, the second poem to appear in the *ex votos* section is "St. Martin," a poem that takes us to Peru. The namesake is Martin de Porres of Lima, a 16th century man, the son of a former slave who was raised in poverty. The racial restrictions of the Dominicans initially kept St. Martin from the priesthood; he was given servant's tasks to perform instead. Later, however, he was initiated into the order and eventually canonized by the Catholic church. He is remembered largely for his tireless devotion to the poor, although the speakers of the poem question this legacy. Osbey's poem addresses St. Martin through a communal voice that expresses itself as "we" throughout the poem. This address resonates with a prayerful tone, and the speakers' remarks identify them as Peruvian slaves. They speak to St. Martin in a mixture of English and creole Spanish. The inclusion of the poem in this largely New Orleans-based text makes sense in the context of shared histories of slavery and Creole culture. Additionally, Osbey's approach toward St. Martin mirrors her approach toward other characters that likewise occupy potentially treacherous positions in relation to their communities.

[18] An awareness of Osbey's interest in religious syncretism is helpful in reading her poetry. However, while there is great value in further tracing the contours of Afro-Creole religious traditions in her work, my focus is not so much to contextualize her poems in terms of this cultural heritage, but to show instead the social work that these ghosts allow. I approach Harjo similarly, with less interest on the tribally specific heritage of Creek Indian haunting practices than on the ghost's ways of making meaning in the poem. My approach here echoes Kathleen Brogan's. Brogan also argues that an exploration of specific influences on ghosts in ethnic literature "valuably illuminates the specific histories and local understandings these texts engage, yet… obscures the fact that these contemporary American works… re-create ethnic identity through an imaginative recuperation of the past and… press this new version of the past into the service of the present" (4).

The poem's speakers take up positions of both adoration and antagonism toward St. Martin. On one level, the speakers offer devotional sentiments of prayer and veneration to St. Martin, pleading with him to "remember" them and addressing him throughout the poem as "benisimo" and "hermano nostro." Alongside these gestures of homage, however, the speakers challenge St. Martin for having forgotten them once he has attained in his privileged place among saints. They remind him of their plight, which is not so far removed, they suggest, from his, a common quality that he seems also, from their perspective, to have forgotten:

> we labor and are wasted away
>
> while you stand sweeping in the big house and are spared.
>
> little saint
>
> hermano nostro
>
> where is your mercy now, where is your pity, your goodness
>
> all your love of the poor? (86)

According to the speakers, St. Martin has abandoned them, capitulated to interests that exclude them, by accepting the brotherhood of the Dominicans. Alternately petitioning and threatening him, they warn, as Osbey explains in a brief article, "of his being barred from the true kingdom of the dead of their own spiritual world, and other unnamed dangers" (18). They tell him:

> nor do we forget the many ways of torture.
>
> remember
>
> little black saint:

the day of the drum is yet to come.

remember benisimo

that ancestors do not die. (86-87)

If the poem's speakers plead with St. Martin to remember their plight and intercede on their behalf, it is a plea mixed with threat that situates St. Martin, as Osbey explains, "as both 'saint of slaves' and 'slave of saints'" (18). The dual position of the speakers reflects a creolized prayer that echoes Catholic piety toward saints but also remains grounded in Afro-Creole religious tradition. The sustained vocalization of both traditions allows the poem its complexity. Osbey never collapses this tension, but instead invites us to consider its layered perspectives under the heading *ex votos.*

Despite the poem's inclusion in the *ex votos* section, and despite Osbey's own repeated assertions of reverence for the dead, the object of devotion in the poem resists easy identification, since the poem offers challenging perspectives on both St. Martin and the speakers. Whether St. Martin, the speakers, or both is the object of the offering is difficult to determine. If Martin de Porres is a saint, he is not consistently glorified, due to his failure to answer those who entreat him. If his devotional audience prays to him, they offer threat alongside humility and also remind him of his subordinate position. Accordingly, neither St. Martin nor the speakers is reconciled as heroic in the poem; instead, Osbey sustains the complex, somewhat antagonistic position between them. The prayer moves beyond pure supplication. The speakers are alternately humble and proud, pleading and warning, praising St. Martin and chastising his negligent behavior. The speakers not only play the role of prayerful pilgrims, but also the role of community

elders, reminding St. Martin to remember his beginnings and his Afro-Creole religious roots. If their attitude toward him is dynamic rather than reductive, the placement of the poem among a selection of poems that appear to be offerings remains questionable. But again, acknowledgement of complexity is key to the reading. As an *ex votos* offering, "St. Martin" challenges the terms of devotion, which here moves beyond blind acceptance. Osbey doesn't sacrifice complexity for the sake of easy sanctification. Devotion in the poem includes the multi-dimensional attitude of the speakers toward the saint – their love, their adoration, their concern, and their warnings. Osbey's own offering is the multi-dimensional representation of both parties, underwritten by the implication that community-minded narratives can make room for multiple, and even contradictory, subject positions.

Just as "St. Martin" renegotiates the terms of devotional practice toward a troublesome figure, so do Osbey's other poems offer complex reconciliations with subversive and sometimes problematic characters. Luis Congo, for example, is a historical New Orleans figure who appears in two poems in this section. In the first, "The Head of Luis Congo Speaks," the narrator reveals himself as the head, apparently severed, of Luis Congo, "lying/ burnt and rotting in some farmer's field" (98), seemingly victim to a violent death that has relegated him to an unknown location. The poem traces Congo's extended dying monologue as he begs for water, mourns his inability to pass to an afterlife, and confesses and defends his actions. Congo seems on the surface to be strange figure to appear in a volume dedicated to recognizing sacredness. A freed slave in New Orleans in the early 1700s, Congo purchased freedom for himself and his wife by

accepting the position of executioner offered to him by local authorities. Congo executed runaway slaves, whom Osbey has him identify in the poem: "men, women, children/ the aged and those with child" (101). Emphasizing that his victims included the vulnerable as well as the strong, Congo also hints at the magnitude of his actions. His victims were many; they "fell down in heaps along the waters of the bayou" (101). Congo does not shrink from this identity. Addressing a seemingly wide community, including the slaves whom he murdered and those whom he threatened, he says, "all of you/ lived with the very intimate fear/ of my good killing hand./ it is all/ all of it/ most certainly true" (102). Having taken full ownership of his actions, Congo's plea in the poem is for water, literally because he is dying but also suggesting his desire to be cleansed, renewed, or ministered to by the community. Dismembered, his eyes gouged out and hands cut off, Congo cannot enter "blessèd mbanza kongo," the kingdom of afterlife,[19] because he is not whole. In defense of his actions, Congo claims that he killed with integrity, sending slaves "whole to the ancestors" and releasing them "from… lowly life bondage" (103).

If Osbey keeps Congo in a sort of purgatory in this poem, she makes room for his redemption the second time he appears. In "The Business of Pursuit: San Malo's Prayer," Juan San Malo, a maroon leader who has been lionized in New Orleans folks songs, addresses Luis Congo, taking up multiple perspectives toward him. San Malo, who could not have been a contemporary of Congo in real life, having lived in New Orleans in the 18th century, is here cast in the roles of victim, antagonist, and absolver to Congo's executioner. Although his most dynamic action in the poem is to offer forgiveness

[19] Osbey defines Mbanza Kongo as "in Kongo cosmology, the ideal capital to which the holy departed return, situated on a hilltop and ruled by a mighty and beloved king" (125).

toward Congo, his mercy does not come easily. Congo obviously occupies a difficult place in the larger narrative of devotion and offerings made in this collection of poems. He is remembered as a traitor, and San Malo acknowledges this history in his address. He mocks Congo, calling to him, "o great o great o great/ deceiver" (109), and he gestures toward Congo's dismemberment, telling Congo that he has his tongue. San Malo defends his own party's murder of Congo, calling that act "revenge, respite, the holiest of reckonings" (112). He also imagines himself as one of Congo's victims: "my head goes up on the pole just as you decreed" (113). His imagined death and punishment at Congo's hands highlights San Malo's difference from him; San Malo reminds Congo that he, unlike Congo, has remained loyal to his community. The "treachery" for which he has been killed is a resistance to slavery. He explains, "in spite of treacherous blood/ […]my tongue is mine/ and black as night" (113).

The full-scale recognition of Luis Congo's actions makes his recovery among the other saints of the book that much more powerful. San Malo's heroism counters the weight of Congo's treachery; this heroism opens a space through which San Malo, and by default the reader, can review Congo's actions in the context of a larger horror, the shared history of slavery. Writing the heroic figure as the absolver is a powerful narrative strategy that redeems Luis Congo from a shameful remembrance by contextualizing his choices in the larger narrative of slavery's terror. "how free can any of us have been?" San Malo asks Luis Congo (114), suggesting that Congo's treachery is indicative more of a severe constraint of choices than of Congo's character deficiencies. In his defense, San

Malo argues: “i say the traitor’s heart is long and wide and deep as any other’s” (111). He continues:

i say luis congo looked out from his highest tower

and cursed the dark, the land, his own slave-heart.

i say he saw them with their heads jammed to their poles

and spat into the wind and cursed the night.

i say it is no small thing to betray one’s own. (114)

If several narrative strands are present in these two poems, presenting Luis Congo as traitor, confessor, victim of a righteous assassination, and finally victim of the greater violence of slavery, then we see at work the negotiating, repositioning work of a ghost story. Osbey considers Luis Congo in a variety of contexts, actively seeking the narrative framework – or multiplicity of frameworks, rather – through which to understand him. The poems effectively challenge the idea of a single, coherent lens on Luis Congo. Instead, Osbey insists on what Avery Gordon would call his “complex personhood.” She tells “more than one story at time” (25) about him, and she sustains the contradictions of the positions she contends that he occupies. She does not collapse the story of his treachery, for example, in recovering him through San Malo’s forgiveness. The story of Luis Congo is reassessed and collected into the larger communal memory in a more complex context, or series of contexts, that is sustainable because it makes room for multiple perspectives, including but not simply reduced to, forgiveness.

If Congo and San Malo seem to deliver narrative recovery in a gothic fashion, the form reflects the horror of the initial historical framework of slavery, and it also licenses

the text to "speak the unspeakable," to borrow a phrase from Teresa Goddu. Goddu's *Gothic America* posits a link between African American revisionist fiction and the gothic. Far from being ahistorical, as previous generations of scholarship have suggested, the gothic, Goddu contends, can very much be contextualized to its historical moment. Its point of reference is not simply the metaphorical blackness of the inner workings of the human mind. Instead, the genre relies, much like the narratives that exoticize New Orleans, on the imaginative potential of racialized blackness that has been sublimated into a vague strangeness that seemingly lacks a referent. Goddu is interested not only in nineteenth century gothic texts, but also in gothic elements in recent African American fictions that "haunt back," highlighting the historicity of the genre by using gothic conventions to signify the terror of "slavery's unspeakable history" (132). The result is a revision of an exotic, troubling narrative mode toward a clearer assertion of referents, much in the same way that Osbey's ghosts recover the lost subjects of narratives of exotic New Orleans.

If gothic fictions "haunt back," reflecting the structure of the narratives they contest by refitting their conventions to tell the greater story of the horror of slavery, the ghostly revisions Osbey offers work similarly. They confront the violence of the narrative of exotic New Orleans, which, relying on strategies of excision and misrepresentation, represents racial hybridity as anxiety-inducing and thus transformed into an exoticized gimmick or banished as an element of the city's foreign past. That narrative fails to open a sustainable place for non-white cultures and thrives instead on the imaginative possibilities of movement facilitated by an exoticized other. If the

transfixing aura of exotic narratives misdirects our attention toward a spell of enchantment emptied of its real racial referents, Osbey's ghosts redirect us toward a polyvocal narrative whose haunting is far more sustainable. Her figures respond by working to some degree within the structure of exotic representations, appearing as ghostly presences and telling sensuous stories of excess. Yet the ghosts' work undermines the official narrative by attributing slavery as the larger author of violence. Luis Congo, for example, may act in some ways as an agent of colonial violence, but his choices are contextualized under San Malo's acknowledgement of his constraints. Osbey's incorporation of potentially treacherous figures thus makes room for a dynamic narrative in several key ways. She points to the violence of narrative excision by "haunting back" through vocal severed heads and images of cut-off tongues. She also recalls troublesome figures into to the community by reading their choices as forced by the constraints of a far greater horror. Lastly, she undermines the exotic narrative by reworking its conventions away from the construction of a racially exclusive identity and toward an inclusive community of ancestors whose stories are more fully remembered and thus reconciled.

Joy Harjo

While Joy Harjo's poem "New Orleans" emerges from a different cultural context than Osbey's *All Saints*, her use of ghosts similarly works to recover cultural elements that standard narratives of New Orleans have omitted. Harjo also recalls Osbey in her decision to memorialize non-heroic characters, though her ghost of de Soto is obviously

far more deeply implicated as an agent of colonial violence. In Harjo's poem, a Creek narrator arrives in the city initially to "look for evidence of other Creeks" (43). The narrator is not a typical entering stranger in an exotic New Orleans narrative; instead, she disrupts that code by working actively to recognize Creek history, people and culture in an area formerly the Creek Indians' homeland. The evidence she finds largely consists of reminders – or omissions that she can recognize, rather – of genocide, as well as stories and memory. Harjo writes,

> There are voices buried in the Mississippi
> mud. There are ancestors and future children
> buried beneath the currents stirred up by
> pleasure boats going up and down.
> There are stories here made of memory. (44)

The "ancestors and future children" are the estimated 10,000 to 20,000 members of the Creek nation who lived in the Southeast during the colonial period. Identifying them as "voices" rather than numbers, Harjo reminds the reader of the human costs of genocide. Her "future children" reference signals not only the deaths of actual Creeks, but also the loss of potential; a phantom history in which Creek culture continues to thrive is imagined alongside actual events.

Before we look to the ghostly matters of Harjo's poem, we should investigate the geography that Harjo uses, which may itself at first seem spectral or otherwise strange. Harjo's poem doesn't only stress the existence of alternate stories and memories – and a ghost – to counter official narratives. The poem also rethinks the geography of the

postcolonial city, asserting a more dynamic geography that counters the legitimacy and power of Western geographies that assume inanimate landscape elements. In keeping with her radical geography, the narrator also infuses the commercialized setting of the contemporary city with the history that the colonial project has forgotten: the memory of the area as it is identified by Creeks who recognize it as homeland. This memory of pre-colonial New Orleans is used in counterpoint to emphasize the foreignness, from this perspective, of the city's shops, boats, buildings, and statues. In one French Quarter shop, a clerk's unawareness "that he is inside magic stones" has the potential to "destroy him" (43). The narrator's warning that the clerk should be aware of the dynamic landscape indicates Harjo's critique of the danger of knowing only colonial or postcolonial New Orleans, rather than recognizing the area's pre-colonial history and the power of its geography. Essential to this critique is Harjo's emphasis on destruction, or the inherent fatality of the colonial project of New Orleans, which fails to recognize the power and memory of the land and water on which the city has been constructed. Harjo's poem casts the contemporary city as a site of consumerism and transience – indicated by the persistent presence of commercial buildings and moving vehicles in the poem – built upon a living landscape that the modern city ignores. This landscape, however, according to the poem, remembers its own history, as do pre-colonial peoples; Harjo writes, "These things/ have memory,/ you know./ I have a memory./ It swims deep in blood,/ a delta in the skin" (43-44).

In addition to recognizing the memory of the pre-colonial landscape, Harjo describes, in the verse quoted above, Creek voices buried in the riverbed. In this verse,

Native Americans are placed within Harjo's living landscape, and their voices resonate with an ambiguity that allows the narrator both to mourn the decimation of the Creek tribes and to suggest a future of revitalization of the Creek community, which might endure alongside the living landscape after the temporal passage of the constructed city. This ambiguity is revealed in the phrase "future children/ buried beneath the currents," which simultaneously references the destruction of the genealogical lines of ancestors – whose children will not be born – as well as the potential resurgence of a Creek population born out of the Mississippi River area. The pleasure boat in this verse is reminiscent of the death-and-pleasure dynamic that emerges in exotic New Orleans works; however, rather than romance this dynamic, Harjo critiques an explicitly colonial relationship between death and pleasure. The pleasure boat is likely a gambling or cruise boat, both of which are unique New Orleans tourist draws. In Harjo's construction, the pleasure boat alludes directly to the European colonies' economic success and exploitation, which have relied on the decimation and relocation of Native American tribes. However, it is also important to note the temporality of the boat, which passes repeatedly across the river but never becomes a fixed part of the living landscape. The boat, as with all the capitalistic products of the constructed city, is subverted within a hierarchical system in the poem that privileges the endurance, memory, and potentially destructive power of the landscape and thus subtly alludes to the eventual passage of these objects.

The narrator eventually roots her quest in finding the body of Hernando de Soto, the first Spanish explorer to observe Native American populations in the Mississippi

River area in the 1540s; she reports, “Maybe his body is what I am looking for” (45). Eventually, Harjo sees his ghost. She writes,

> And I know that I have seen DeSoto,
>
> having a drink on Bourbon Street,
>
> mad and crazy
>
> dancing with a woman as gold
>
> as the river bottom. (46)

In this conclusion of her poem, Harjo has de Soto realize, in his drunken pleasure, that the wealth of the Southeast colonies lay in the Native American cultures whose eradication he provoked. Dancing, de Soto has embraced the woman whose skin tone, “gold/ as the river bottom,” resists categorization; it may be brown, or it may be a fantastic gold. Wealth is thus redefined, associated with both the woman (potentially Creek herself) and the river bottom, which represents the living landscape that functions as the site of both tribal decimation and tribal generation. In her representation of de Soto, Harjo again deploys elements of the exotic New Orleans vocabulary in a non-exoticizing manner; here, madness overwhelms de Soto, an entering stranger. However, his madness may be ironic, as it is madness only according to a limited Eurocentric perspective, one in which the embrace of Native American culture would be considered crazy. Within this construction however, de Soto’s reclamation of a semblance of sanity is implicated; the irony of the statement suggests that real madness is de Soto’s former quest, which he thought was for gold (45). According to the narrator’s earlier claims, de Soto’s quest actually sought “something his heart wasn’t big enough to handle” (45); that

line intimates that the larger something is the culture, which the conclusion of the poem conflates with gold, and which de Soto finally embraces. Harjo's poem uses de Soto's ironic madness to argue against the persistent forgetting of Native American cultural foundations in the New Orleans area; she rewrites the failure to recognize New Orleans' pre-colonial cultures as the ultimate madness.

Harjo's incorporation of de Soto's ghost allows the poet to reinvest colonial history with meaningfulness on her own terms. Her approach recalls the reenactment of the arrival of Spanish colonizers at Acquemeh Pueblo, as described by Simon Ortiz. The event Ortiz describes involves men dressed as caricatures of two figures, Santiago, "the patron saint of Spanish soldiers," and Chapiyuh, a Franciscan priest who carries a bullwhip. As obvious spectacles, the figures dress garishly for the event, and they wind through Acqu, following "the route that Juan de Onate's soldiers took when they razed Acqu in the winter of 1598" (8). The Acquemeh people attend the event as both spectators and participants who, like Ortiz's uncle, offer prayers and songs that contextualize the event. If the Acquemeh event seems, like Harjo's inclusion of de Soto in her poem, strange in its direct revisitation of a painful past, Ortiz argues instead for the necessity of the event, which guards against forgetting. The reenactment guarantees that "no one will regard [the event] as less than momentous." Through the reenactment, colonial experiences "can become significant and realized in the people's own terms." Ortiz likens the performance to literature, since both "bring about meaning and meaningfulness." If the experience isn't reenacted for and by the community, "the hard experience of the Euroamerican colonization of the lands and people of the Western

Hemisphere would be driven into the dark recesses of the indigenous mind and psyche." For Ortiz, remembrance of colonial events is the sustainable option; its alternative, repression, "is always a poison and detriment to creative growth and expression" (9). Revisiting the colonial past through performance and literature allows for the recognition and transformation of the living memory of colonial violence on the terms of the authors, rather than denying the memory's presence.

The Acquemeh reenactment recalls Kathleen Brogan's distinction between "bad" and "good forms of haunting" and also provides a context for reading Harjo's work. Brogan identifies as bad forms of haunting experiences like possession, in which traumatic experience cannot be integrated with the present because it is "too incomprehensible or too horrific," prompting "the intrusion of unbidden memories" and an accompanying extreme distress. However, Brogan specifies, the ghost can be "transformed into a safer presence," and the signal for its integration is usually that one can articulate the experiences that the memory driving it evokes (7). In both the Acquemeh reenactment and in Harjo's poem, the goal is to give voice to a living memory in the interest of sustaining community growth and expressiveness. These are good hauntings, integrated into present experience as expressions of creative response to historical violence. They form, to borrow Gordon's language once more, emotionally dense narratives. Harjo, for example, repositions de Soto in the poem, crafting him into an alternate narrative that disrupts the notion of historical closure by imposing de Soto onto the space of the present. His appearance acknowledges the persistence of his legacy. Harjo's ultimate reassessment of him, however, is hardly transparent, but instead

ambiguous, leaving the ghost's work unresolved and open. Yet this openness is keenly fitting for a narrative of sustainability, as it does the work of confrontation, rearrangement, and creative response. It forces open the histories offered by official narratives and invites revision and inquiry. If we understand Harjo's poem as building a sustainable narrative in the interest of her larger Native American community, as the comparison to Ortiz's event suggests, then we can also read her work as participating in the larger project of communitism.

The concept of communitism originates with Jace Weaver, who uses the neologism to suggest "a proactive commitment to Native community" that involves participation "in the healing of the grief and sense of exile felt by Native communities and the pained individuals in them." He further clarifies the significance of this commitment in identifying its lack as "tantamount to psychic suicide" for Native peoples (43). For Weaver, communitism may be the most crucial shared marker of Native American literatures, describing the core concept that connects a diverse body of tribally specific literatures. Reading Harjo's ghost as an expression of communitism solidifies the lines of argument suggested by both Ortiz and Brogan because Weaver's concept underscores the importance of sustainability in Native narrative construction, of writing toward the greater good of Native peoples.

While Weaver's concept of communitism develops from his extensive study of Native American culture and cultural productions, it also aligns well with Osbey's interests in its focus on both place and people. Quoting from Louise Erdrich, Weaver offers a definition of community as "a place that has been 'inhabited for generations,'

where 'the landscape becomes enlivened by a sense of group and family history'" (38). Although Weaver identifies the definition as specific to Native peoples, Osbey's devotion both to ancestors and to the New Orleans they and she traffic in resonates well with the concept. Reading both Osbey's and Harjo's ghosts as communitist hauntings frames the poems as activist responses to colonial violence and shows that memorialization narratives can reclaim and reposition stories about both place and community identity. The ghosts of Harjo and Osbey reshape the narrative of exotic New Orleans by returning to crucial moments in colonial history, which were also crucial moments in the shaping of the dominant narrative. Through these poems, New Orleans is alternately recast as the site of a sensuous, non-anthropocentric geography, as a potential site for Creek Indian regeneration, as a site for the practice of viable, syncretic Afro-Creole religious traditions, and as a site for a complex, devotional remembrance of historical figures suffering slavery's constraints. In short, New Orleans becomes a *lieu de mémoire,* a place made sacred to specific communities by virtue of the memorialization of regenerative narratives that resist the sweep of history. The emergence of these narrative elements relies on authorial confrontations of the overwhelming tendency of New Orleans narratives to rely on exoticism rather than on serious appraisal of colonialism's legacies. To reconcile with exoticism's erasures, Osbey and Harjo reconcile with troublesome figures, raising the stakes of their project by memorializing difficult histories. But these difficulties are precisely what generate the dynamic thrust of these poems. Contextualized within larger frameworks of sacredness, devotion and community sustainability, the living memories of violence are woven into broader conversations that

both fully acknowledge the past and transform its narratives toward a more complex, more multi-voiced present.

Conclusion: The Racial Imaginary in Contemporary New Orleans

The idea of New Orleans as an exotic space holds much traction on the national consciousness. Imagined as a place of wildness and freedom, as well as a place of constriction and destruction, the exotic city is alternately celebrated and critiqued in literary and cultural representations. It can appear as a fantastic space that even borders on the magical. Yet its difference is underwritten by a history of troubling racialized narratives that have real-life consequences. Specifically, the idea of exotic New Orleans often draws on a negative racial imaginary, and it places both the city and its citizens in positions of marginal power. By way of concluding this project, I turn to several contemporary non-literary representations that inherit key conventions of the narrative of exotic New Orleans, including especially its deeply coded metaphorical language. These representations demonstrate the potential problems inherent in maintaining the idea of the city's difference. They show the ways in which the exclusionary, racialized discourses that underwrite the idea of exotic New Orleans are reworked in the language of everyday life and ultimately damage the local community.

In 1995, Mike Foster, who would soon become Louisiana's governor, referred to New Orleans as a "jungle" during a gubernatorial campaign debate with his running mate Cleo Fields. Comparing crime rates between Jefferson Parish and the adjacent city of New Orleans, Foster described the parish by saying, "'It is right next to the jungle in New Orleans and it has a very low crime rate'" (qtd. Walsh A1). Fields responded, "'You ought to be ashamed of yourself. […] It's an insult to the people of New Orleans to have a

candidate for governor say they live in a jungle'" (qtd. in Edsall A9). Fields was not Foster's only detractor. Local citizens were outraged by what they identified as stinging racist undertones in Foster's remark, which compared two historically polarized and often antagonistic communities, majority-white Jefferson Parish and majority-black New Orleans. Politicians and reporters also weighed in on the comment at length. Foster finally apologized, driven either by sincerity or political expediency, and contended that he did not intend the metaphor as a racial offense, but as a reference to the threat of a steadily increasing crime rate which could potentially thwart the city's economic growth by provoking fear among locals and tourists alike.

The controversy surrounding Foster's remark demonstrates the ways in which racialized discourse takes shape in contemporary New Orleans. The more subtle implications of Foster's remark were easily recognized by many New Orleanians, who read his use of the term "jungle" with an awareness sharpened by a long history of interaction with coded rhetoric. Exposing the codes was a shared strategy in the various criticisms of Foster, which also pointed out the historical precursors for his rhetoric. Then-Mayor of the city Marc Morial identified Foster's remark as "'sophisticated David Duke-style race baiting'" (qtd. in Kelso B11). Likewise, *Times-Picayune* reporter Iris Kelso noted, "That word [jungle] became an ugly race word for me in 1977, when a candidate running against Dutch Morial for mayor said Morial was bringing 'jungle bunnies' from across state lines to vote" (B11). Both of these responses place Foster's remark within a larger, local history of racialized discourse, in which the word "jungle" is used as a derogatory, dehumanizing term. Local newspaper columnist Lolis Eric Elie

also identified Foster's remark as racially coded; he suggested that Foster's use of the word "jungle" was itself expedient, designed to lure white voters by appealing to racist stereotypes that draw on "latent animosities" to promote antipathy between black and white voters.

Foster's critics revealed that his remark relies on a racial imaginary that reads blackness as a force of deep threat and corruption. His comparison of New Orleans to a jungle employs a specific, local code of racialized rhetoric with dehumanizing implications. His comment also resonates directly with Tennessee Williams' use of the jungle metaphor, and it recalls George Washington Cable's implied claim that blackness threatens New Orleans' success in assimilating as an American space. In reading blackness as threatening, Foster's comment, like the literary works that precede it, also participates in broader, historical discourses that are already part of our social imaginary. Their link to colonialist discourse, for example, is recognized in Frantz Fanon's work. Fanon acknowledges the racialized referents of the term "jungle" in *Black Skin, White Masks* when he writes that the colonized subject "is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle" (18). Although Fanon does not elaborate further in this particular passage on the relationship between the jungle and racial stereotypes, his comment does suggest that the term encodes a Manichean relationship between blackness, as it is constructed to represent chaos, wildness and savagery, and whiteness, which is made to represent the more privileged values of civilization. In a later passage in *Black Skin, White Masks,* Fanon shows that the term is used to mask

white guilt; it invokes an irreducible sense of difference between white civilization and black savagery, and this difference is used to legitimate enforced racial hierarchies. Fanon quotes Bernard Wolfe to trace the historical usage of the term: "'Ever since slavery began, his Christian and democratic guilt as a slave-owner has led the southerner to describe the Negro as an animal. […] If the black man found himself relegated to the Limbo of mankind, he was the victim not of Americans but of the organic inferiority of his jungle ancestors'" (qtd. in Fanon 174). The irony in the latter half of Wolfe's remark reveals the colonialist lens through which the idea of the jungle is constructed. Through this lens, the jungle becomes a metaphor used to justify the exclusion of black Americans from the terms of whiteness and civility. Not only does the term "jungle" signal derision, but it also creates a distinctly foreign space for the containment of black colonial subjects, thus excluding them from the terms of national identity.

Foster's comment, along with Cable's and Williams' representations of New Orleans, relies on and contributes to multiple, overlapping discourses of race. Drawing upon local discursive codes and colonialistic racisms that aim to justify racial hierarchies, each of these depictions of New Orleans also depends upon and contributes to the notion that the city is peripheral to the nation. Its exclusion is tied to the exclusion of blackness from the national fabric, which as Toni Morrison argues, is the product of American writers' reliance on the imaginative possibilities of a metaphorical blackness in their construction of personal and national identities. By creating a negative racial imaginary that associates blackness with what is forbidden, threatening or otherwise antithetical to national identity, writers fashion identity through opposition, divorcing themselves from

the stigma that blackness is constructed to represent and thus distancing blackness from the national. If we read Foster's remark as a means of divorcing himself from an imagined blackness that he associates with New Orleans, then we must also read it as an attempt to distance New Orleans, and especially black New Orleanians, from the national mainstream. This exclusion is exactly what is at stake in representations of New Orleans as a jungle: the metaphor becomes problematic not only because it relies on a damaging racial imaginary, but also because it suggests that blackness cannot be reconciled with American identity.

Foster follows the literary representations of Cable and Williams in relying on dehumanizing and exclusionary racialized discourses in depicting New Orleans, but his jungle reference also ups the ante by criminalizing blackness. Whereas Cable's and Williams' representations retain some ambivalence about New Orleans, Foster's description of the city is more decidedly critical than it is celebratory. His comment demonstrates that the racialized discourses that form the basis of literary narratives of exotic New Orleans also influence the idea of New Orleans in daily life. His comment also indicates that the idea of New Orleans is frequently tied in the social imaginary to a fear of racialized others; criminalization is a contemporary articulation of that fear. In drawing from racialized discourses that have a long history of shaping representations of the city, Foster shows that these discourses maintain both currency and power; depictions of New Orleans continue to recycle their ideas. In fact, many of the published responses to Hurricane Katrina are driven by these discourses, and multiple sources follow Foster's lead by representing New Orleans through images of criminalized blackness. Like

Foster's remark, these responses leave no room for positive readings of the city or its inhabitants.

Ten years after the Foster controversy, local leaders, evacuees, professional responders and various media sources narrated the horrors of Hurricane Katrina through a grotesque lens of violence that relied, like Foster's jungle comment, on a demonized racial imaginary. Among the louder and more incriminating local voices was that of former New Orleans police superintendent Eddie Compass, whom mayor Ray Nagin asked to resign later in 2005, presumably in response to Compass' rumor mongering. During the height of the trauma faced by New Orleanians and tourists stranded at the Superdome and Convention Center in the immediate aftermath of the storm, Compass went so far as to tell Oprah Winfrey that babies were being raped at the Superdome. Nagin himself reported that the stranded had devolved into an "almost animalistic state" after "watching dead bodies, watching hooligans killing people, raping people" (qtd. in Thevenot and Russel, par. 14; qtd. in Rosenblatt and Rainey, par. 6). Both leaders, joined by national and international news teams, crafted a horrifying portrait of depravity at the two last-resort hurricane shelters. However, their reports were eventually investigated by journalists at the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times* and found to be a false representation of actual events. Erroneous reports had prepared doctors who arrived to collect bodies at the Superdome for hundreds of victims – but the final body count at the Superdome, according to a report generated by the *Times-Picayune* on September 26, 2005, tallied at six. Four of these six reportedly died "of natural causes," while one overdosed and one committed suicide (qtd. in Thevenot

and Russell, par. 5). Officials recovered an additional four bodies at the Convention Center.

The disjunction between actual events and the rhetoric of violence employed to narrate the hurricane's aftermath is troubling. It shows the persisting attractive power of a negative racial imaginary, which in this instance provides the event's narrators with a false but familiar framework through which to offer their supposed first-hand accounts. On September 1st, for example, Fox news journalist Greta Van Susteren opened her report from the Houston Astrodome with the following set-up, contrasting Houston's civility with New Orleans' bedlam: "This isn't New Orleans, where people are shooting each other, where there's [sic] rapes and gunfights" ("Hurricane," par. 2). She then invites commentary from an emergency room physician who worked inside the Superdome. "Doctor Burnell," she asks, "tell me what it is like inside that Superdome" (par. 24). He reports, "Well, we had several murders. We had three murders last night. We had a total of six rapes last night. We had the day before – I think there were three or four murders. There were half a dozen rapes that night" (par. 33). As a physician and responder, Burnell seems to possess a credible ethos, as do other quoted sources who solidified his remarks with their own narratives of violence. An interview with Louisiana state trooper Lieutenant Lawrence McLeary, for example, follows Burnell's. McLeary observes, "The sun has gone down, of course, and that's when the criminal element likes to come out and prey upon people. […] We know that there have been roving bands of hoodlums that have been preying upon the citizens at their most vulnerable time. […] And I think, you know, all of our hearts go out to those good citizens of New Orleans

who are vulnerable and these criminals are taking advantage of" (par. 39-41). The facile dichotomy of good victims versus evil thugs created by Burnell, McLeary and the reporters is replayed throughout many of the reports on the experiences of evacuees in the Superdome and Convention Center.

Among other media outlets pushing sensationalism, the *Chicago Tribune* was still publishing reports as late as September 15th describing "throngs of sweat-drenched refugees […] stepping over the unattended dead – all while rumors of gang rapes, murders and violent mayhem swirled from the darkened buildings behind them. […] Life in the two teeming urban shelters," the report breathily proposes, "quickly devolved into a Hobbesian world of ruthless predators preying on the weak" (Salopek and Horan, par. 5-7). The language of the report is stunning, even exciting, but also deeply rooted in false information and rhetoric that demeans evacuees as either criminals or weaklings. "Belligerent shoving matches erupted," we are told (par. 20). And "[c]riminals prowled" (par. 40). A statement from pathologist Gregory Henderson, who worked at the Convention Center, follows: "'[When] the night would fall it became like a Stephen King novel. These predators were holed up in the center, and they came out and preyed on the people'" (qtd. in Salopek and Horan, par. 46). The report continues: "Henderson said that refugees told of storm-sodden girls being dragged inside the blackened building and raped, then thrown back out" (par. 47). Other analogies describing the scenes included the London *Evening Standard*'s references to *Mad Max* and *Lord of the Flies* (Rosenblatt and Rainey, par. 16). If these reports used references to fiction to heighten the drama, other sources relied on the power of vagueness to suggest a horror so immense

that it contained all imaginable possibilities. Sydney's *Daily Telegraph,* for example, published an interview with an Australian tourist who noted, "'There were gangsters, thugs, rapists, child molesters: Anything you want to put in there, it was in there'" (qtd. in Papps, par. 25).

Such exaggerated rhetoric accompanied and likely spurred on inflated body counts, marking supposed victims of the fiction of a savage and widespread violence that knew no limits and no morality. Embracing rumors without checking facts is irresponsible at best, and in this case, the press and local leaders helped perpetuate a damning and erroneous narrative that wrote New Orleans as a savage city. While some news reports demonstrated an occasional hesitancy, these suspensions of sensationalism were often muted. In the case of the *Chicago Tribune*'s September 15th story, a disclaimer that some reports of violence could not officially confirmed seems voided by the report's investment in luridly recording details that bordered on extravagance in their inscription of excessive violence.

Much like Foster's remark, these narratives of violence rely heavily on a racial imaginary that criminalizes blackness. Ostensibly, we are to believe that the supposed perpetrators of these fictions of violence were African Americans. This supposition is grounded in the fact that the vast majority of evacuees who came to the Superdome and Convention Center were black New Orleanians whose race was central to visual documentations in the aftermath of the hurricane. Race also became central to the reports that circulated among local leaders, the media and the evacuees themselves as they constructed a narrative lens through which they attempted to make sense of the trauma at

hand. Specifically, a narrative of black pathology, grounded in the image of black men as criminals, became a framing lens through which the crises at the Superdome and Convention Center were narrated.

This lens is the arguably the same one that frames Foster's remark. Its appearance ten years later indicates that the image has much traction in the national consciousness and carries the power to determine how narratives are organized. The sticking power of this image is explained by Wahneema Lubiano, who argues, "In the dominant imaginary, the United States is threatened from within by Black men and the drug trade and by Black women and their culture of poverty" (73). In other words, the fiction of a "Black transgressive outlaw group" circulates widely and is popularly accepted, so much so that it takes on the power to determine how events will be framed in representation (Lubiano 72). As Lubiano clarifies, "The bogey man in the closet is prepared for by the various fears already available to us" (74). Lubiano's argument at least partially explains why police superintendent Eddie Compass would narrate the crises at the Superdome and Convention Center by calling on a narrative that assumes depraved sexuality among black men. In reporting that babies were being raped at the Superdome, Compass relied on an image of black male hypersexuality that had already been prepared for him. In a time of panic, confusion and government abandonment, Compass seems to have bypassed a more logical response of critique or appeal for help and defaulted instead to an irrational but familiar, already constructed narrative to express what must have been an overwhelming sense of crisis and fear. The evocative power of the narrative he chose is demonstrated by the excesses of violence that it allowed

Compass, as well as other seemingly credible sources, such as medical responders and local leaders, to describe.

But even if we attribute Compass' remarks to an anxiety that defaulted to pre-existing narratives in a moment of crisis, it remains perplexing that he and Mayor Ray Nagin, as leaders of the city's black professional class, would promulgate such damaging narratives of black criminality. Are these civic leaders so far removed from the black urban under class that they failed to recognize the danger in falsely characterizing the poor? Lubiano's analysis would suggest that a reliance on a damaging racial imaginary is far from uncommon, even among those whose investment in resisting this imaginary would seem obvious. She writes, "Black men and Black women are highly visible in the media, but they are also highly visible *to themselves as metaphors for deviance* and for transgressiveness. These metaphors are so visible within the group that they function as the grid through which we check our concrete reality" (74). To illustrate the centrality of this racial imaginary, Lubiano offers two common rejoinders used to critique black scholarly work: "(*a*) it won't save crack babies in the ghetto, or (*b*) it won't reach the brother on the street corner selling crack" (74). If these images represent a yardstick against which black intellectual work is often tested as succeeding or failing, they also demonstrate the pervasiveness of a representational framework that equates blackness with criminality. Why must the yardstick measure the efficacy of scholarship against an image that equates blackness with criminality? Lubiano describes these images as markers of "Black pathology" (74) that are much too easily assumed, even among groups who ostensibly attempt to embrace an oppositional political stance and to work in the

interest of black communities.

Lubiano's analysis is furthered by James Kyung-Jin Lee, whose work on racial representation in *Urban Triage: Race and the Fictions of Multiculturalism* provides a historical explanation for the formation of the racial imaginary that Lubiano decries. Although Lee's work provides a context for reading John Edgar Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire,* it is also highly useful in theorizing the responses of leaders like Compass and Nagin. Lee describes what he identifies as "differential racialization," or the emergence of competing racial discourses that have "enabled sundry visions of Blackness largely (but not exclusively) determined by the position that one occupies within a political economic structure" (110). In Lee's analysis, "these competing versions of Blackness" (110) fracture along class lines and result from late 20th century urban political economies that produced mounting class divisions among Black communities. Alongside the "supposed integration into the American mainstream" of the Black middle class, Lee argues, there emerges a "discourse of the behaviorally pathological black 'underclass'" (109). Lee explains the relationship between these two movements: "the Black poor, in the face of the relative economic success of the Black middle class, transmogrify into a dangerous menace, a population lacking basic social skills and values, and requiring even further surveillance and criminal regulation. The production of one community corresponds to the creation of the other; more insidiously, the celebration of one rests upon the regulation of the other" (109). In regards to the rhetoric surrounding the crisis at the Superdome and Convention Center, Lee's analysis, like Lubiano's, suggests that local leaders may have demonized the stranded by drawing on a pre-

existing rhetoric against the destitute. But Lee's work also suggests that the racial imaginary upon which Compass and Nagin drew may have been rooted in felt divisions among black New Orleanians who occupied various class strata, including many who had already accepted the image of a transgressive, racialized outlaw group, against which they defined themselves.

But if Lubiano's and Lee's analyses provide some explanation for the emergence of narratives of black pathology, the dissimilarities between this rhetorical event and the Foster controversy remain striking. Unlike Foster's comment, the circulation of narratives of black criminalization didn't draw the ire of the public, despite the fact that the rhetoric in use was less subtly coded and the narratives more widespread. The lack of response to these damaging narratives, as well as the more widespread circulation of them, seems strange, considering that Foster's remark drew on similar assumptions of black pathology and provoked immediate criticism. However, the silence may have owed to the fact that many New Orleanians were themselves scattered and traumatized, unable on various levels to access their usual media outlets for response. In fact, the *Times-Picayune*'s reporting team did eventually investigate the disparities between rhetoric, reported crime and actual body counts in a sober account, and the paper later published criticism of Compass, once the reporting staff had more fully re-assembled. But if the disjunction between these two rhetorical events may be partially explained by the inability of many New Orleanians to access the press, another key difference between them also concerns the moment in which each narrative was generated. Whereas the Foster controversy evolved over a period of relative stability and heightened sensitivity to

campaign rhetoric, the reports generated from the Superdome and Convention Center emerged from a genuine moment of crisis and demonstrated a language of immediacy narrated in the moment of trauma.

Again, Lee's analysis may be useful in theorizing the difference between the two moments. His analysis also studies representations of blackness in a moment of crisis, namely after the 1985 MOVE bombing in Philadelphia. Ultimately, Lee observes the emergence of a "symbolic contest" between varied class-based articulations of blackness. He is largely concerned here with antagonism between the black poor and the black destitute, two groups he describes as sharing "the common fate of receiving and surviving the brutal legacy of racialized economic exploitation" (110). In Lee's analysis, the political economy of 1980s Philadelphia brought on "a period of economic decline [...] and shrinking resources" that engendered anxiety especially among the black poor, who faced the brunt of "material deprivation and loss of political legitimacy." In response, members of this group frequently contrasted themselves "against those who [had] been shunted completely to the margins: the destitute" (110). If Lee's theory, that moments of crisis in black communities can yield the villification of "those whom everyone can agree deserve social stigma, the 'surplus body' of Black destitution" (111), then we may very well be able to extend his analysis to explain the differences between the two rhetorical moments under consideration. It may be the case that in the days after Katrina, black New Orleans leaders and evacuees, aware that the media would be covering the crisis in racialized narratives that would damage their political legitimacy, defaulted to their own narratives of pathology as an anxious response meant to distance themselves from a

racialized imaginary that would certainly be in play. Their contest against a fictionalized underclass comprised of criminals may have been enacted to guarantee them a position of greater political stability in a moment of intense destabilization, despite the fact that their rhetoric only irritated the problem further.

The adoption of the narrative of criminalization by various groups following Hurricane Katrina indicates its powerful hold on the American consciousness and suggests that the habit of imagining New Orleans through the terms of damaging racial imaginary is alive and well. Unfortunately, this habit of representation also assumes the city's difference from national norms. If this difference is subtly coded in narratives of criminalization, it also saw a more explicit articulation in a set of media responses generated in Katrina's aftermath. In the days following the storm, the terms "refugees" and "Third World" emerged frequently to describe New Orleans and its citizens. The terms resonate with the jungle metaphor, which cordons off racialized subjects in a colonialistic fashion, removing them from inclusion in the national fabric by affiliating them with a distinctly foreign and uncivilized space. Likewise, the term "refugees," usually reserved for persons crossing international, not state, borders, suggests that New Orleanians are not included in the national body. Ultimately, the implications of this term were addressed in the media, so that the term was commonly replaced with "evacuees." However, references to the "Third World" conditions of New Orleans in its post-storm aftermath were similarly frequent, but these references gathered little critique, despite the fact that "Third World" also suggests that the city occupies a peripheral position determined largely by the racialization of its inhabitants. According to political

anthropologist Virginia Dominguez, who contends that the term "Third World" never connotes a positive image in the U.S., descriptions of New Orleans as such were racially encoded:

> If our television screens were showing us hour after hour of 'white people'—dirty, frantic, worried people but still people we saw as 'just white people'—would all these references to "Third World" conditions have surfaced? I doubt it. Far likelier would have been references to the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl, the San Francisco Earthquake at the turn of the 20th century, or even the condition of Bosnian or Croatian refugees in the Balkans as war tore apart Yugoslavia. ("Seeing," par. 14)

For Dominguez, the habits of perception encoded by the term "Third World" are troubling. The representation of the black poor of New Orleans as non-national and the expressions of apparent surprise generated over their appearance are dual responses that, according to Dominguez, demonstrate "familiar forms of perception of the U.S.," despite the fact that the rhetoric suggests that an awareness of the depths of American poverty is new and surprising information (par. 13). In a sense, the sudden recognition of the poor forecasts a quick forgetting; the failure to recognize a pre-existing problem of great magnitude suggests that many Americans, after a brief period of protest, will be willing to continue to overlook the fact of poverty in the interest of embracing more reassuring mainstream narratives, such as the myth of American prosperity. The description of New Orleans as "Third World" facilitates this response, as it allows for a dramatic recognition of the black poor that simultaneously imagines this group as existing beyond the

boundaries of the nation. According to Dominguez, the term "mentally allows people to think that poverty and non-whiteness are non-American things, even when they are present in the U.S. in significant numbers" (par. 13). Dominguez also hears in the term "Third World" echoes of a larger American habit of treating New Orleans as an exceptional space; she worries that this habit too will persist, thereby also contributing to the continuing marginalization of the black poor. If New Orleans is always already imagined as peripheral, the problems of social injustice highlighted by Katrina will easily be dismissed, despite the fact that "New Orleans is really a very American city," and "[p]overty and blackness are very American things" (par. 26).

Editorialist Lynne Duke voices similar concerns that "Third World" suggests national attachment to a narrative of prosperity that the fact of poverty disrupts. If we follow through on her analysis, the term reveals a desire to represent the black poor in New Orleans as non-national because they threaten the myth of American superiority; they reveal that some of America's most closely guarded narratives ignore basic facts of American life. Duke writes in *The Washington Post* that the more she heard it, the term "Third World" increasingly to her "sounded like an expression of our national anxiety – that the line we imagine separates us from lesser nations can be breached so quickly, can render our national superiority vulnerable" (B1). According to Duke, references to the city's foreignness encode a "sense of national superiority" that is problematic in large part because it reveals less of a concern for humanitarian crisis and more of a concern about national image. The difference between these two, she maintains, is crucial in that they prompt very different responses. Duke explains, "Genuine humanitarian concern

can spark action, propel correction. Hurt national pride, on the other hand, can be salved in lots of ways that may have nothing to do with helping Katrina's poorest victims. I mean, for how many years has dire American poverty been ignored while America's sense of superiority marches on?" (B1)

The language of response following Hurricane Katrina indicates that contemporary representations of New Orleans continue to rely on discourses that describe the city through references to a damaging racial imaginary. We can see resonances of Foster's comment, for example, recycled directly into narratives of criminalization; both instances recall Tennessee Williams' anxious notions of a devouring blackness. Although the contemporary representations excise Williams' ambiguity and his references to sensualized desire, they do describe fears of a racialized other, as articulated in a contemporary context. Likewise, the use of exclusionary terms like "Third World" reveals the influence of literary precursors like Cable. Whereas Cable attempts to remove blackness and poverty to an imagined space beyond the nation in order to assimilate New Orleans, the contemporary representations seem to challenge his claims directly by implying that New Orleans cannot be emptied of these elements and thus cannot be assimilated. The overarching result of these representations is the continuing construction, through racialized discourse, of New Orleans as a nationally peripheral space. The similarity of the responses to Hurricane Katrina, despite their having been generated by a variety of sources, reveals the depths to which this construction has saturated our national consciousness.

If contemporary non-literary representations of New Orleans reveal the persistence of older narratives, we do not have to look far to find fictional or cinematic representations that also show the influence of literary precursors. The 2005 film *Skeleton Key*, for example, adopts many familiar narrative conventions. The film may not be perfectly true to type in constructing the exotic city; in fact, most of the action occurs just beyond New Orleans, in a plantation home in an outlying parish. But the film is clearly heavily indebted to representations that locate New Orleans as a key representational site for exploring an alarmist racial narrative.

Skeleton Key orients its beginning action in New Orleans and follows a white young woman, Caroline Ellis (Kate Hudson), who arrives alone in the city. Like Cable's Joseph Frowenfeld, Caroline is an orphan. She comes from New Jersey, a detail that is emphasized frequently and disparagingly by the locals who insist that she cannot understand New Orleans or its surrounding environs. The difference of the place is mystified by the fact that it is never fully explained: *why* New Orleans and Terrebonne Parish are different is not revealed. All that matters is that they *are* different. This difference replays the notion that New Orleans is a nationally peripheral space, and it is emphasized by the locals' insistence on Caroline's foreignness, which highlights their own isolation. In fact, one character dismissively doubts the existence of decent gardens in New Jersey, despite Caroline's identification of it as the Garden State. The area's foreignness is also accentuated when Caroline enters a gas station and is aggressively questioned in French by a man who acts surprised when she does not comprehend him.

If *Skeleton Key* highlights a sense of the area's foreignness, it echoes Tennessee Williams in depicting this strangeness as deeply attractive but severely threatening. In the gas station, Caroline finds herself baffled by a series of weird sights and sounds that we later learn are associated with hoodoo, a practice of folk magic. Bones hang on strings suspended from the ceiling like mobiles, and red brick dust marks the foot of doorways. In a later scene at this site, a phonograph plays old voice recordings that contain strange cadences and repetitions; they are recordings of spells. The hoodoo element of the film is not only strange to Caroline; it also holds an intense attraction for her. Early in the film, she discovers a locked room in an attic filled with hoodoo ritual effects and memorabilia, and she frequently returns to the room, sometimes stealing items from it to study in secret. Her obsession deepens until she begins to experiment with spells herself. Ultimately though, in another Williams-esque turn of events, the hoodoo overcomes her. The two main hoodoo practitioners of the film, a pair of former black servants named Papa Justify (Ronald McCall) and Mama Cecile (Jeryl Prescott Sales), sacrifice Caroline, trapping her in a ritual that displaces her spirit in the body of an aging woman.

The horror of *Skeleton Key* is reminiscent of Williams' work in relying on the threat of a devouring blackness. The ending of the film reveals that Caroline has all along been the victim of an elaborate plot through which Mama Cecile can steal her body. As a way of extending their mortality, the spirits of Papa Justify and Mama Cecile leap from white body to white body, transferring the spirit of the previous inhabitant to the body that they formerly possessed. The film suggests that the former servants can

only overtake white bodies, since black victims are harder to come by, a condition ostensibly created, according to the film, by the willingness of black locals to believe in hoodoo and thus exit a situation they recognize as dangerous. The film also posits blackness as cruelly perverse. If the obliteration of heroic and self-sacrificing Caroline is unjust, then the first sacrificial victims, two small children, indicates the villains' utter monstrousness.

Skeleton Key's use of racial narratives went largely unnoted after its release. The film was hardly controversial; in fact, most critics derided it as a flop rather than as a reprisal of dangerous racial stereotypes. This reception largely mirrors the way in which the responses to Hurricane Katrina were received in the same year. Both the film and the variety of responses to Katrina draw on a damaging racial imaginary, yet few of these representations were called out very loudly for their assumptions. This critical silence points to the persistence of deep-rooted fears of racialized others that can still be translated into American public discourse without heavy controversy. The narrative of exotic New Orleans remains a well-used vehicle for the articulation of these anxieties.

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